

Decolonising Knowledge and Gender in the Pacific. Sia Figiel's Insider View of Samoan Women in *Freelove*

Abstract: The trivialization of Pacific Islanders' existence, exposed in travel books and fiction on the 'South Seas' from the late 18th century to the present, includes a view of Polynesian women as sexually saturated figures, in which exoticism and eroticism overlap. The theories of anthropologists, synthesized in the Mead-Freeman controversy on female sexuality in Samoa, reflect an instrumental use of indigenous cultures to demonstrate preconceptual hypotheses. Samoan writer Sia Figiel has been one of the first Pacific Islands women to offer an insider representation of Pacific femininity. Her works reflect the "decolonial turn" advocated by Maria Lugones to reject the hierarchical dichotomies and categorial logic of the Western episteme and affirm that "fractured locus" which allows multiple ontological presuppositions. Her latest novel *Freelove* (2016), analysed in this article, is centred on the coming of age of a Samoan girl in the 1980s and offers an unprecedented viewpoint on Samoan female sexuality, from an indigenous perspective.

Keywords: *Sia Figiel, Freelove, decolonial theory, gender, Pacific literature, Samoa*

Representations of Polynesian women as erotic projections of Western men's desires can be found in innumerable sources – travel writings, novels, visual texts, films – from the eighteenth century up to the present.¹ Among the very first testimonies are the visual and textual materials of Cook's three voyages,² which include many images of Polynesian women gazing alluringly at the viewer and exposing their breasts despite being draped, as explained by Margaret Jolly. The texts accompanying these illustrations often convey the writer's sense of sexual excitation, while he describes beautiful female bodies with perfect proportions, seductive eyes sparkling with fire, and behaviours marked by "a charming frankness".³ A similar representation is also found in the so-called "South Seas idyll" or "romance", which became popular in 19th-century fiction, featuring an exotic kind of femininity sexually captivating and spontaneously offering itself to virile European and American colonists or voyagers: a "sexually saturated figure".⁴ Herman Melville's *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) and its sequel *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847) are exemplars of this genre together with Pierre Loti's *Le Mariage de Loti* (1880). In early 20th century, a journalist and symbol of the liberated European woman of the 1890s, Beatrice Grimshaw, could not abstain from the same eroticisation of Polynesian women in her travel book *In the Strange South Seas* (1907), where photographs and texts "collude to create, yet again, an image of exotic Polynesian beauty".⁵ The languidness of women is associated with the luxuriant nature of their islands. Both appear as lush, fertile, spontaneous and free. While Grimshaw does not completely disempower all women, as appears in her depiction of older Polynesian women of high rank, she tends however to romanticise these figures too, by evoking with

¹ Margaret Jolly, "From Point Venus to Bali Ha'i: Eroticism and exoticism in Representations of the Pacific", in L. Manderson and M. Jolly, eds., *Sites of Desire, Economies of Pleasure: Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* (Chicago and London: Chicago U.P., 1997), 99-122.

² James Cook's three voyages took place in the following periods: 1768-71, 1772-75 and 1776-80.

³ Jolly, "From Point Venus to Bali Ha'i", 100-101. Jolly is quoting the words of George Forster, who travelled with his father, the German naturalist Johann Reinhold Forster, on Cook's second voyage.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 99 (both quotations).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

nostalgia their faded beauty and past romances.⁶ This romantic view clashes with the undesirable heritage left by Western men in Polynesia: a multitude of illegitimate children of mixed ancestry, venereal diseases and the attendant infertility, exploitation of land and sea, and pollution of the environment. The trope of Polynesia as a sexual and natural paradise for Westerners is also later used by Hollywood in such films as *The Mutiny of the Bounty* (1962), directed by Lewis Milestone and featuring Marlon Brando. The cinematic adaptation of a Broadway musical of the 1950s, *South Pacific* (1958), directed by Joshua Logan, also develops a modernised but equally inauthentic view of a spectacular and generic Pacific.⁷

Margaret Jolly argues that there are “manifestations of connections between bodily revelation and imperial might in the Pacific”, positing “a close connection between eroticism, exoticism and political and military colonisation”.⁸ Teresia Teaiwa also considers the relation between the two bikinis, the daring new swimsuit of 1946 and the atoll after which it was named (where the Americans dropped 25 nuclear bombs between 1946 and 1958), pointing out that:

the bikini bathing suit is testament to the recurring trivialization of Pacific Islanders’ experience and existence. By drawing the attention to a sexualised and supposedly depoliticised female body, the bikini distracts from the colonial and highly political origins of its name.⁹

Samoan women also became the object of anthropological research, epitomised by the ‘Mead-Freeman controversy’. American anthropologist Margaret Mead undertook fieldwork in American Samoa in the 1920s to demonstrate that socialization not genetic heredity was the primary determinant of human behaviour. As Michelle Keown summarises, in Mead’s bestselling *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), resulting from this experience, the anthropologist argued that:

the “general casualness” of Samoan society, where “love and hate, jealousy and revenge, sorrow and bereavement, are all matters of weeks” and where casual pre-marital sex is accepted and encouraged as a “natural pleasurable” activity (1943: 162), ensured that Samoan adolescents experienced none of the transitional difficulties which American teenagers endured as they emerged into adulthood.¹⁰

This ‘Orientalist’ vision of Pacific Islands life, which praises the casualness and freedom of Samoan sexuality as opposed to the complex and inhibitory sophistication of Western morality, conceals criticism of the ‘sexophobic’ American society of the 1920s rather than providing a real insight into Samoan customary practices towards sex and marriage. As Jolly underlines, in Polynesian cultures sexuality “was not so much ‘free’ as celebrated and sacralised”,¹¹ an aspect that was completely misread by Mead and manipulated by Western travellers and colonists. Mead’s study was also discredited in the 1980s by New Zealand anthropologist Derek Freeman, who rejected all the claims made by his American colleague, included the idea of Samoan society as a sexually permissive one. He presented an image of Samoans as competitive and aggressive, inclined to crime, assault and rape. In his view, children are subject to strict discipline and severe punishments. Adolescents are often affected by tension and psychological turbulence, which leads to a high rate of juvenile criminality. Pre-marital sex and

⁶ Ibid., 108.

⁷ Ibid., 112.

⁸ Ibid., 99.

⁹ Teresia Teaiwa, “bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans”, *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6.1 (Spring 1994), 87-109, 87.

¹⁰ Michelle Keown, *Pacific Islands Writing* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2007), 49. The quotations are from: Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1943 [1928]).

¹¹ Jolly, “From Point Venus to Bali Ha’i”, 100.

adultery are also considered serious offences to morals and sanctioned.¹² Mead's and Freeman's theories are so excessive and distant from one another that they both arouse a certain degree of suspicion about their credibility.

A number of indigenous writers have critically engaged with Pacific anthropological discourse, among whom Samoan Albert Wendt and Sia Figiel. Wendt's novel *The Mango's Kiss* (2003), for example, features an American anthropologist, Freemeade, whose name condenses those of his two real colleagues. Ironically, while the Mead-Freeman controversy focused essentially on heterosexuality, in Wendt's story Freemeade is a homosexual who has affairs with local fa'afafine (trans-sexuals). Fa'afafine (also spelt fa'afafige) are regarded as a third gender in Samoan culture, since they embody both masculine and feminine gender traits.¹³ They are also called the "two-spirited" and considered blessed children at birth. By introducing fa'afafine in his story Wendt overcomes Western binary gender roles, satirizes the Mead-Freeman controversy and provides an insider view of Samoan culture. In her first novel *Where We Once Belonged* (1996), Figiel, too, ridicules the Mead-Freeman controversy. The (in)famous anthropological debate is synthesized in the account of a schoolgirl and reduced to a petty argument on whether Samoan girls 'do' it a lot or not.¹⁴ Figiel also offers a serious commentary on Mead's conclusions, depicting a contrasting image of Samoan adolescence as a traumatic 'coming of age', in which female chastity is highly valued and enforced through punishment and the threat of public humiliation.¹⁵ In the novel, the missionaries' teachings appear as a major influence on Samoan views on sexuality, especially for women. However, Figiel celebrates "female friendship, teenage camaraderie and the folk humour associated with the Western Samoan oral tradition",¹⁶ debunking Freeman's work as well.¹⁷

Sia Figiel's last novel *Freelove* (2016) continues on this subject, but while *Where We Once Belonged* still seems to act as a response to previous external views on Samoa – those of Western anthropologists, missionaries, and writers – in *Freelove* Figiel has found her own centre and an indigenous perspective, from which the narrative arises. *Freelove* deals with issues such as knowledge and education, sexuality and gender roles, not just in reaction to Western thinking or values but rather from an autochthonous viewpoint, based on indigenous criteria. The novel engages in a search for complexity grounded in a "non-modern", rather than "pre-modern" perspective, in Maria Lugones' words,¹⁸ that is, a different way "of organising the social, the cosmological, the ecological, the economic and the spiritual", and also the sexual. As Simanu-Klutz writes in the introductory pages, the novel is "unconventional and unsettling" and "portrays the Samoan experience with honesty. A welcome shift that depicts young islanders coming into their own without the hangovers of postcoloniality."¹⁹

Freelove is a love story, but also a "story of intellectual and sexual awakening", as Figiel has commented in an interview.²⁰ The protagonist, Inosia Alofafua Afatasi, is a seventeen-and-a-half-year-old girl, living in a small village not too far from the Samoan capital, Apia, in 1985. Inosia, abbreviated as Sia, belongs to a traditional extended family including many siblings and relatives. She has grown up with a strict Christian indoctrination, as most Samoans, but is also a fan of transgressive Madonna as

¹² Fabio Dei, "Il problema della realtà etnografica. La controversia Mead-Freeman", *L'Uomo. Società, tradizione, sviluppo*, 4.2 (1991), 209-234, 214-15.

¹³ Keown, *Pacific Islands Writing*, 49-50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁵ Michelle Keown, "'Gauguin Is Dead': Sia Figiel and the Representation of the Polynesian Female Body", *SPAN* 48/49 (April and October 1999), 91-107, 99.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

¹⁷ As to Samoan adolescents in Figiel's novels, see also Juniper Ellis, "Moving the Centre: An Interview with Sia Figiel", *World Literature Written in English*, 37.1-2 (1998), 69-79, 75-76.

¹⁸ Maria Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism", *Hypatia*, 25.4 (Fall 2010), 742-759, 734.

¹⁹ Fata Simanu-Klutz, "More Praise for Freelove from across Oceania", in Sia Figiel, *Freelove* (Honolulu: Lo'ih Press, 2016).

²⁰ Vilsoni Hereniko, "An Interview with Sia Figiel by Vilsoni Hereniko", in Sia Figiel, *Freelove*, 220-239, 220.

well as Whitney Houston, Chaka Khan, and Paul Young, whose songs she listens to together with Samoan latest hits. There are only three television sets in the whole village, but it is through TV series like *Dallas*, *Love Boat* and *Fantasy Land* that she can first see love enacted. Movies such as *Grease* and *The Return of the Dragon* also contribute to her imagery about love, which is therefore external and imported: it has been colonized by Western (especially American) mass media. Sia's favourite series is however *Star Trek*, with its emphasis on space as the last frontier and the missions of the starship Enterprise "to seek out new life and new civilisations, to boldly go where no man has gone before".²¹ The *Star Trek* imagery becomes a further source of metaphors and parallels in the book for Sia's personal future voyage of discovery of new worlds and possibilities. Even so, from the very beginning, Sia notices that in the projected future of the American TV series there are no women in decision-making positions and imagines an indigenised alternative: "with Samoan *girls* and *women* as captains navigating beyond the Milky Way Galaxy as they might have done on canoes in ancient and future times".²²

Most of the book is centred around one single special day at the end of the schoolyear, on which Sia accepts Mr Ioage²³ Viliamu's offer of a lift to Apia, where she is going to run an errand for her mother. Ioage is her science and maths teacher, twelve years her senior. In the course of this day her initiation into sex and the mystery of love will occur. Despite the student-teacher scandal it might entail and the fact that, being the pastor's son, Ioage is virtually a 'spiritual brother' to Sia, their physical, intellectual and spiritual union is deep. It invests all of their beings: bodies and emotions, mind and knowledge, sense of belonging and cultural background, needs of the present and expectations for the future. Sia is Ioage's most brilliant student, a girl with brains, the winner of all the maths competitions in the country. Ioage, on the other hand, is a challenging teacher and uncommon scholar, with an excellent curriculum of international studies and a sound preparation in both Western science and indigenous experiential knowledge. His teaching is set at the interface between two different ontological visions and epistemic systems, and this constitutes Sia's most precious inheritance from high school. Ioage encourages his students to trace parallels between the Western scientific paradigm and Samoan patrimony of observational science, covering different disciplines and fields such as astronomy, biology, natural science, ecology, nautical charts and techniques:

His radical approach to teaching excited us about condensation and precipitation. Metamorphosis and symbiosis, in ways that made us not only understand such processes or relationships or chain reactions, but to know [*sic*] that our people understood the same, in their own language, which made Science and Mathematics so much more personal and intimate not to mention alive.²⁴

He teaches both in Samoan and English, because concepts need to be expressed in the language in which they were born. As Ellis suggests, this is "living science, embodied, felt, aware, self-observed science".²⁵ An example is when he insists on an ecological approach to the environment, whose main principles are inherent in Samoan mythological narrative:

After all, *he is Mr Viliamu*. The most magical thing to ever happen to me since I started high school. Someone who had sparked in me an interest in my surrounding, my environment and my ecosystem. Someone who had impressed on me the tremendous importance of respecting our lands, our seas, and our skies. Who reminded us daily that we, as Samoans and as human beings have a responsibility to nature. To respect it. To honor it and to take care of it. After all, he said, Nature sustains us.

²¹ Sia Figiel, *Freelove*, 22.

²² Ibid.

²³ In the novel the name is also spelled Ioane.

²⁴ Figiel, *Freelove*, 69.

²⁵ Juniper Ellis, "Oceanian Knowing ad Decolonial Love in Sia Figiel's *Freelove*", in Matthew Hayward and Maebh Long, eds., *New Oceania: Modernisms and Modernities in the Pacific* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 210-226, 213.

Our Oceanic people have known this truth since *Fatu ma le Eleele*, the original man and woman who were made by *Taga’aloalagi*. And how they practiced and witnessed scientific concepts and processes but had their own way of calling them. Which is why he insisted on teaching us in both English and Samoan. So that the concepts and processes our ancestors practiced, that we now teach in a classroom as Science, are never to be forgotten.²⁶

Ioage’s method is “mind-blowing” for an intellectually gifted girl like Sia, who comes to realise that she has mostly been taught *palagi* (white) knowledge at school: “Outside Knowledge. Foreign knowledge. Which implies somehow that it is superior to our own ways of understanding this precious planet”.²⁷ Ioage wants to recover the “collective memory”²⁸ that was silenced during colonization and arouse the students’ interest starting from the world around them. Unlike the tyrannical English literature teacher, who refers to imagery unknown to students, Ioage’s *modus operandi* “won their heart”:²⁹

How do you expect us to be excited about flowers that grew in a landscape none of us have ever been to?
And why should such flowers be exalted?
Glorified?
And the authors of such poems glorified along with them?
As if our local flowers and storytellers were unworthy of the same praise and attention.³⁰

Nevertheless, few lines above, while Sia is thinking about Mr Viliamu, her mind “wandered (lonely as a cloud, that floats high o’er vales and hills)”,³¹ an ironic reference to Wordsworth’s famous poem and the subliminal effects of the colonization of knowledge.

As Juniper Ellis claims, in *Freelove* Figiel “establishes the priority, in time, space and episteme, of decolonial conceptions of mathematics and science”.³² Through Ioage and Sia, Figiel puts into action the “epistemic disobedience” advocated by Walter Dignolo, which allows “delinking (epistemically and politically) from the web of imperial knowledge”.³³ Ioage teaches Sia to recover indigenous repressed knowledge. He prepares her to understand and face the outer world without losing her own cultural identity. He encourages her to travel and study abroad without undervaluing an indigenous perspective but, rather, to investigate possible parallels between Western and ancestral knowledge. He also emphasises the importance to come back and bring the fruits of experience to Samoa, as he did before her. At the end of the novel Sia is admitted to a Californian university to study astronomy and physics, and “to further understand how our ancestors were able to calculate everything in time before compasses and other technology”.³⁴ After obtaining her bachelor’s degree with merit, she will be granted a full scholarship for graduate studies in her latest intellectual passion: plasma science and thermonuclear fusion, whereby energy is generated in the stars and sun. In this way, as Ellis suggests, she carries forth her own ancestral genealogy: her middle name – which means loving unconditionally and freely in Samoan – is also the name of her ancestor Alofafua, “who adored and had sex with the sun, leading to an ‘almost celestial aura’ still visible around the women of her line”,³⁵ like Sia’s mother and grandmother.

²⁶ Figiel, *Freelove*, 55-56.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 56, both quotations.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

³² Ellis, “Oceanian Knowing and Decolonial Love in Sia Figiel’s *Freelove*”, 212.

³³ Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26 (7-8) 2009, 1-23, 20 (both quotations).

³⁴ Figiel, *Freelove*, 210.

³⁵ Ellis, “Oceanian Knowing and Decolonial Love in Sia Figiel’s *Freelove*”, 215. The inner quotation is from Figiel, *Freelove*, 49.

On the day of her sex initiation Sia is wearing a pair of skinny jeans and the *Madonna The Virgin Tour 1985* T-Shirt. The song line “Like a virgin touched for the very first time” resounds in her and the reader’s minds. But Sia and Ioage’s intercourse is not a Hollywood idealised love scene at all. Figiel describes, quite realistically, the physical and intellectual pleasure of the couple also recording their embarrassment, fears and surprise at what is an unexpected event for both. Following the ritual of tradition, Ioage practices a private version of the Samoan public deflowering ceremony, which was supposed to prepare the virgins to their first sexual act. But during penetration, when Sia laments pain, he immediately stops, which leads to other ways and games to make the intercourse natural and enjoyable for both, until penetration is possible. The scene, which occupies most of the book, takes place against a lush natural background, a wood near a lake where the couple will later take a swim. This does not make the scene a pastoral idyll, as in South Seas romances. Sia and Ioage appear as supportive and compatible beings, giving each other physical pleasure and listening to one another’s needs in the light of mutual respect. There is no sign of gender predominance or superiority but a sense of equality and complementarity.

The couple also engages in a voyage of discovery of the other and discusses a variety of topics, such as new scientific theories, customary practices and habits, religious and social preconceptions on sex, the view of love and marriage in Samoan tradition, and their future expectations. In this witty conversation between two brilliant minds, many Western stereotypes are dismantled. An example regards Polynesian women’s hair. According to the Western stereotype, Polynesian women wore their long black hair loose on their shoulders. Ioage has very long hair, too, arranged in a bun, unlike most of today’s Samoan men, who have short hair. He explains that in pre-contact times it was men (not women) who wore long hair:

Before the missionaries arrived, Samoan men wore their hair long, which as you know is now the opposite to what we have. Ironically, long hair on women is what the world thinks of when they wish to picture or imagine a Samoan girl nowadays. But in the old days, it was a women’s fashion or style to have *her* hair shaved with only a curl behind her left ear to signify her virginal taupou status.³⁶

Another debunked myth is that sexual life in Samoa was free and casual. This idea is juxtaposed to the evidence of a society based on subsistence economy and strict clan alliances, where most marriages, especially for the upper classes, were and still are arranged:

Romantic love is a purely American Hollywood illusion. Our people believed in something more long lasting. Something that wasn’t just instant gratification ... Marriage is arranged for us with women we don’t even know, but we do it because it’s our duty.³⁷

Nevertheless, the intensity of sexual pleasure and the search for reciprocal satisfaction is something inherent in Samoan traditional culture. Sexuality, as previously mentioned, was celebrated as sacred because it genealogically connected individuals to the gods. It was a vital force that contributed to creating harmony within a married couple and alliances between families through marriages, as Ioage explains to Sia:

There are even ancient cultures who devoted huge portions of their lives to nurturing the principles of pleasure and of how sexual gratification and most importantly, sexual satisfaction led ultimately to harmony in every other aspect of a person’s life. Our people also believed in this same principle and did not view sex

³⁶ Figiel, *Freelove*, 152. *Taupou* means ‘sacred’.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 89 and 94.

with disdain but rather with respect as a force of connecting and bringing families into alliances that would foster stronger bonds of peace and harmony so that those virtues are passed onto the next generation.³⁸

Ellis reports that Figiel's view is based on twenty years of research into ancestral conceptions and practices of sexuality, in order "to surpass imported missionary understandings of gender and sexuality",³⁹ which however had an enormous impact on Samoan people. Sia herself is utterly dumbfounded after her carnal knowledge of Ioage, because in her extended family sex was stigmatised and considered a taboo subject. Her total naïveté about sex and ignorance of her own body, originating in the community's demonization of sexuality, demonstrate the pervasive influence of missionary teachings, which created, in Ellis's words "internal fear, social judgement, and severe restrictions around sexuality".⁴⁰ Sia later admits that her initial pain during their intercourse might have been a phantom of her mind:

I wondered to myself whether the pain I felt was real or whether I had imagined it. After all, we were told very early on, as soon as we were visited by the Moon [menstrual cycle] that sex was something bad and dirty and nasty and that no good girl would want to be engaged in it until she was properly married in a ceremony that involved not only our immediate family that we live with but our extended families who live in other villages and in other outer islands not to mention our own village and that only sluts and whores enjoyed it, not good girls.⁴¹

Through Ioage and Sia's wide-ranging dialogues on that special day, Figiel unveils the heavy burden of Christianity on Samoan culture and customary practices, proving Mead's hypothesis totally wrong. Freeman's opposite (and exaggerated) theory, on the contrary, totally missed the reasons of the firm discipline exercised by families on youngsters. Figiel's debunking of Mead's and Freeman's 'Orientalism' was analysed by Sadiya Abubakar in relation to *Where We Once Belonged*. Her arguments can however be enlarged to *Freelove* as well.⁴² Abubakar maintains that both Mead and Freeman made overgeneralisations on Samoans' dispositions. Their respective researches were conducted only on one specific area and regarded a limited number of people: Mead was on Ta'u, one of the most rugged and remote islands in today's American Samoa; Freeman worked on Upolu, a bigger and much more populated island in Western Samoa, where the capital is. Their results were however extended to all Samoans, not taking into account geographical and social diversity, and homogenising the entire population. Social differences (lifestyles and mentality) are instead underlined by Figiel, especially those between Sia's villagers, with their restricted views, and the capital's residents, as appears in the Apia library episode in *Freelove*. In this scene a girl, annoyed for waiting too long to access the restroom occupied by Sia, addresses her with the nasty remark: "Bloody kuabacks. You never seen a mirror before or what?"⁴³ Also, the novel opens with Sia leaving her home with a *lavalava* wrapped around her hips,⁴⁴ which she takes off as soon as she is far from her relatives' gaze to replace it with a pair of skinny jeans: "Uncle Fa'vevesi, my mother's brother had banned us from wearing jeans. According to him, only girls and Women of the Night [prostitutes] wore them".⁴⁵

³⁸ Ibid., 119.

³⁹ Ellis, "Oceanian Knowing and Decolonial Love in Sia Figiel's *Freelove*", 212.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Figiel, *Freelove*, 123-24.

⁴² Sadiya Abubakar, "The Samoan Side: How Sia Figiel Debunks Orientalism in *Where We Once Belonged*", *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies*, 14.2 (July 2018), 105-120.

⁴³ Figiel, *Freelove*, 59. *Kua* means 'back' in Samoan. *Kuabacks* is therefore derogatory for people coming from the backcountry and being backward.

⁴⁴ *Lavalava*: a single rectangular cloth worn as a skirt and used both by men and women.

⁴⁵ Figiel, *Freelove*, 28.

Beside the influence of missionary teachings, however, the strict view on sex and morals can be read in traditional terms as a form of social control. Figiel pinpoints the responsibility of the individual towards the *aiga* (extended family), which is a customary trait of Samoan clan-based society. The family is a protective and normative structure. Family's love is "an invisible blanket that made us feel safe and warm on a cold, cold night",⁴⁶ but needs to be honoured and respected. As an individual you don't only represent yourself but your family too. This is why adult family members keep a close watch over children and adolescents. In this context, a sinful behaviour of the individual brings shame to the whole family group. As Abubakar underlines:

Due to the closely-knit type of family system in Samoa, every member of the *aiga* (family or relatives) is responsible for correcting and shaping the affairs of the other, especially for the younger ones, the adolescent ... So, love is shown to a child not through freedom but through taming; ... Anything that brings pride to the family is, on the one hand, encouraged by the parents, and on the other hand, anything that causes shame is highly discouraged and shun away. Right from a tender age, fear of sinning and crime is instilled in children to drive them far away from doing it.⁴⁷

This is the reason why Ioage and Sia are star-crossed lovers. Their relationship, which continues secretly when Sia is abroad through an intense epistolary exchange, seems hopeless because it would be considered incestuous by the community insofar as they are 'spiritual brother and sister': both families would be offended by such a union. Moreover, in America Sia discovers she is pregnant. It is not a surprise, because she refused to use contraception and insisted that she wanted a baby from Ioage, who was conversely reluctant. The reaction of her sister, who is giving her hospitality, is hostile. To defend the honour of the family she kicks Sia out of her house. Sia will decide to give her baby daughter for adoption to a childless couple of close friends, following a typical Polynesian customary practice.⁴⁸

In *Freelove* Figiel puts into action a process of resistance to the coloniality of knowledge and gender. Coloniality is the inheritance that Western powers left in their ex-colonies: what remains in a post-colonial country after its political independence. It results from denying the possibility of existence of other worlds with different ontological presuppositions.⁴⁹ Coloniality is "constitutive of modernity"⁵⁰ and modernity recognises the non-modern only in a hierarchical relation, in which the non-modern is subordinated to the modern. However, as argued by Lugones, the modern system of power did not meet an empty world of empty minds but "it encountered complex cultural, political, economic, and religious beings: selves in complex relations to the cosmos, to other selves, to generation, to the earth, to living beings, to the inorganic".⁵¹ Colonial difference has created a "fractured locus"⁵² and it is within this fracture that the decolonial process should take place: in the articulation of oppressing/resisting forces.

Freelove is a novel that courageously carries out a decolonial liberatory process of knowledge and gender production. The recovery of repressed indigenous knowledge is an act of freedom from the "colonisation of memory and thus of people's senses of self".⁵³ However, the book also takes into account the complexity of a post-colonial country, encompassed within the hybrid framework left by

⁴⁶ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁷ Abubakar, "The Samoan Side", 112-113.

⁴⁸ The practice of adoption, especially to close relatives, was quite widespread in traditional Polynesian families. It increased the flexibility of the kinship system by accruing additional parents to a child (and vice versa) rather than replacing the child's biological parents. Siblings and cousins frequently adopted one another's children, and grandparents sometimes adopted their own grandchildren. Children were thus able to move freely among all of these families and households. See www.britannica.com/place/Polynesia/Kinship-and-social-hierarchy, accessed 22 November 2020.

⁴⁹ Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism", 749.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism", 747.

⁵² Ibid., 748.

⁵³ Ibid., 745.

colonialism, where opposing and resisting understandings sometimes compete, sometimes overlap. As a woman, Sia is at the intersection of all these contrasting forces, in terms of knowledge and gender, and all the more affected by them. The gender norming introduced by colonisation and Christianity imposes dichotomies rather than complementarity. A figure rooted in Samoan culture like the fa'afafige (the two-spirited) would be seen in a totally different way from a Western perspective, as Cha, Sia's friend and fa'afafige, explains:

How she detested for instance being told by outsiders that her mother dressed her as a girl when she was a child because there were no girls in her household to do family chores which is why she was what she was, a fa'afafige. And I could still remember her indignant voice of protest ... How preposterous! How utterly offensive to assume that I am what I am because of the chores I do and the clothes I was dressed in! Not only is this offensive to me personally but to our entire culture as Samoans, Sia!⁵⁴

If, in this case, Samoan and Western perspectives diverge, they seem to overlap in the strict attitude towards sexuality. This is actually untrue, since the reasons behind such apparently similar approaches are different. In her choice not to follow either customary or Christian rules, Sia challenges both of them. As Ellis effectively articulates: "By attending to the vastness of nativeness, Figiel challenges existing understandings internal and external to Samoa."⁵⁵ The character of Sia resists coloniality and remoulds nativeness in new forms.

The future destiny of the couple is not mentioned and is outside the pages of the book. Sia and Ioage's bond seems to have become increasingly profound and even grounded in myth. In the letters concluding the novel they call each other not by their Christian names but Day (for Sia) and Night (for Ioage), like the original ancestors of humankind, as if they were natural and complementary (not opposing or dichotomous) forces, interconnected and attracting each other, fleeing any coloniality of gender. They make "the whole greater than the gathered parts",⁵⁶ as in the ancient Chinese philosophy of Ying and Yang, and challenge old and new impositions. Their love seems so strong as to challenge any conventional rules or morality. Having done pre-marital sex and being pregnant, Sia could be considered a 'woman of the night', according to the strict views of the community. The pun made by Ioage reverses this view: indeed, she is the "Woman of the Night" (as he calls himself), namely, his partner.⁵⁷

At the end of the novel the title *Freelove* sounds distant from what a reader could have imagined at first sight. It does not mean sexual liberation in the sense of the late-60s-Western feminism or the casual sexuality supposed by Mead's theory. Conversely, it alludes to the possibility of loving according to a vision – ontological, epistemological and cultural – different from the norm: being free to find one's way in love, a decolonised way rooted in non-Western assumptions but also able to confront the limits of customary laws.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Figiel, *Freelove*, 32-33.

⁵⁵ Ellis, "Oceanian Knowing and Decolonial Love in Sia Figiel's *Freelove*", 211.

⁵⁶ Figiel, *Freelove*, 128.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁵⁸ For an exploration of Figiel's speaking-out novels and her attack on both false Western representations and post-independence patriarchal structures of power, see also: Raylene Ramsay, "Indigenous Women Writers in the Pacific: Déwé Gorodé, Sia Figiel, Patricia Grace: Writing Violence as Counter Violence and the Role of Local Context", *Postcolonial Text*, 7.1 (2012), 1-18.