

Aelan Gel/Island Daughters: Co-creative Storytelling of Place and Resilience with Women in Vanuatu

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Through reflections on the *Aelan Gel* project in Vanuatu, this paper examines expressions of meaning related to the lived experiences of urban women in Port Vila, including experiences of gender-based violence, through oral history and storytelling. It explores *Aelan Gel*'s iterative cycles of creative production: the drawing out of the specifics of lived experience through the sharing of autobiographical narratives; working collectively with these stories to co-create site-specific socially engaged performance; and generating a collective text intended to take a more enduring place in the literary and cultural history of women in Vanuatu. The authors consider the role of place as both a character and topic in the autobiographical and collective stories told in this project, as well as a site for cultural action and social intervention strategically chosen to enhance the meaning and potency of women's experiences and voices.

INTRODUCTION

The *Aelan Gel*/Island Daughters project, launched by Marilena Crosato, took place in Port Vila, Vanuatu between October and December 2015 as a grassroots artistic initiative in the aftermath of Tropical Cyclone Pam (TC Pam). It engaged a group of 13 women, aged between 16 and 60 from three local associations, in a co-creative process investigating the effect of gender-related dynamics through autobiographical storytelling, social theatre and performance in the public space.¹ The results of their co-creative story-based practice, *Aelan Gel*, was performed in Port Vila's central market during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence global campaign.² From 2016 to 2018 a further production phase culminated in the publication of the book *Aelan Gel*.³

The first part of the paper considers the complex social and cultural landscape in which this work occurred. It outlines how group oral storytelling facilitates co-creation of shared meanings and social interventions, building on traditional oral transmission and approaches to oral history. Weaving individual stories in a collectively created performance brings awareness about social identity and the possibility of self-affirmation in the sociocultural context. In the second part we focus on the presence of place in oral history in action, nourished by the creative exchanges between the group members and the audience. Place, central in Ni-Vanuatu identity, is present in the narrations and stories told and retold in the making of *Aelan Gel*, evoked through memories and objects, and in the chosen setting of the performance, the Seaside Market House in Port Vila. Finally, we look at the development of a written text, drawn from the oral histories and collectively devised performance, and

1 The *Aelan Gel* performance was co-created by Marilena Crosato with Doreka Berry, Wilma Berry, Ethline Dick, Wendy Issack, Irene Malsungai, Christina Kokona, Rento Joseph, Myriam Malao, Juliette Niram-bath, Anna Pakoa, Joanna Tamath and Eunice Walter.

2 The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence (or Global 16 Days Campaign) is an annual campaign to call for the elimination of all forms of gender-based violence against women, promoted by the Center for Women's Global Leadership. It does not provide monetary support, but works as a platform to link local actions to a global network in multiple locations around the world. Every year, a suggested theme, information and toolkits in several languages are available through the online platform: <https://16dayscampaign.org/>.

3 Marilena Crosato, Ethline Dick, Irene Malsungai, Rento Joseph, Myriam Malao, Juliette Niram-bath, Ann Pakoa and Joanna Tamath, *Aelan Gel* (Port Vila: Alliance Française, 2018).

consider how oral storytelling became a catalyst for the exchange of knowledge and the foregrounding of women's experience and agency on a wider regional level.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL GROUNDING

The two authors of this paper met in Vanuatu before the beginning of the *Aelan Gel* project and connected around themes of participatory creative practice and community development. Haviland, a cultural anthropologist and community development practitioner, had arrived in Vanuatu, from Australia, six weeks before TC Pam in early 2015. She was completing a book about community art and co-creativity, drawn from her work in Australia and North America.⁴ Crosato, a community social theatre and performance practitioner had arrived in Vanuatu, post TC Pam, from Haiti and was considering how to use her skills in post cyclone recovery in Port Vila. The authors' shared interests in co-creative practice spurred a dialogue about its relevance to the cultural, political and social context of Port Vila in the aftermath of the TC Pam disaster.

As Crosato developed the *Aelan Gel* project, she and Haviland agreed to record a series of conversations in English, reflecting on methodological, relational and theoretical concerns emerging from the process. In the period from 2015 to 2018, both undertook research related to the project and its impacts, including interviews with *Aelan Gel* participants, observation during the rehearsal and presentation processes, and engagement with relevant literature. The approach used to develop the analysis for this paper is qualitative, informed by the ethnographic experiences of the two authors, one a practitioner and one an academic researcher, reflecting on the same process from different angles.

Ethnography constitutes a common ground, creating bridges between oral history, art and social studies. The theoretical horizon of both this paper and the *Aelan Gel* project itself references the interpretative anthropology of Clifford Geertz who sees the cultural encounter as a process of attribution of meaning, aiming to define

⁴ Maya Haviland, *Side by Side? Community Art and the Challenge of Co-Creativity* (London: Routledge, 2016).

a local point of view always influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher.⁵ ‘It makes available answers that others have given’ wrote Geertz, ‘to enlarge the repertoire of available symbolic productions’.⁶ The arbitrariness of this vision is grounded by the consideration of concrete social events, arising from the public sphere of community life, and by the cross-cultural dialogue between different views that are all expressions of the human need to give meaning to the world. The social and historical environment in which this research took place required us to think of all the interventions – from processes of storytelling in formal and informal contexts, acts of participant observation, to the artistic creation itself – as actions inserted in a dynamic environment. The social action that produces change is framed by Victor Turner as a form of *social drama*, an active performance in a privileged space where conventional bounds are suspended, new potentialities are expressed, and conflicts can be resolved in the creation of new relationships.⁷ This paper, and the work which it describes, also draws on theories supporting the link between autobiographical storytelling and resilience in a post-disaster context.

The process of making *Aelan Gel* fit broadly within the field of socially engaged theatre. Our discussion draws on anthropological framings of cultural encounter and social drama as generative spaces for the co-production of cultural forms and expressions, new understandings and knowledge, and shared experiences between creative makers and audiences. We refer to socially engaged theatre as a co-creation process involving a social group, where the creative work is both devised from processes of community engagement and, following Tom Finkelpearl, where social interaction is a part of the art itself.⁸ Mimesis becomes a vehicle for new meanings, capturing the echo of private life and amplifying it in a visible and known form, connecting the intimate individual experience with the public experience of the social world.⁹

5 Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (London: Fontana, 1983).

6 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 30.

7 Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ, 1986).

8 Tom Finkelpearl (ed.), *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

9 Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point: Forty Years of Theatrical Exploration, 1946–1987* (London: Methuen, 2008).

Performance in this context is a relational artwork, a space in which possible life alternatives are created, and artists, creative work and members of the public actively dialogue and produce a shared experience and perhaps a shared meaning.¹⁰ In the case of *Aelan Gel*, these interactions were related to the intervention of the work in a significant public space, the Seaside Market House in Port Vila, and to the context of post-disaster recovery, where both vulnerability and resilience can arise.¹¹

The process of production drew on Crosato's socially engaged theatre practice, where the content and form of a creative piece originates from orality and dialogue between the participants in a specific project. The composition and repetition of stories and actions lead to a script, a public event and, eventually, to a written text. This methodology develops an oral history approach that resonates with Portelli's definition of oral history, where qualities such as subjectivity, ephemerality and relationality are leveraged as strengths.¹² We believe that personal narratives, embodied in the actions of people in their local contexts, can engage a symbolic, as well as a relational potential. In the case of *Aelan Gel*, co-creativity and site-specific performance are advancing the scope of possibilities of oral history approaches through the performance of these narratives in ways that tangibly shaped transformative outcomes for both the storytellers and their audiences. In this paper, we seek to explore how oral storytelling and collective narration can be a methodology to reconnect past and future. How it can both evoke and effect place and memory, generating resilience, awareness and shared meanings in response to challenging themes of the lived experiences of women.

10 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2001), 47; Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

11 Jack Saul, *Collective Trauma Collective Healing: Promoting Community Resilience in the Aftermath of Disaster* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

12 Oral history, as defined by Portelli, 'might be understood as the method of "not yet", one that reflects disparate desires and memories and engages a shared imagining of future possibilities'. Kevin P. Murphy, Jennifer L. Pierce and Jason Ruiz, 'What Makes Queer Oral History Different', *The Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (2016): 1–24.

THE SETTINGS

VANUATU AND TC PAM

Vanuatu is a Melanesian archipelago in the South Pacific Ocean, composed of 83 islands (68 of which are inhabited) where more than 100 local languages are spoken across a current population of around 250,000 people. It is a place of immense linguistic and cultural diversity, with a strong unifying national identity. Vanuatu gained its independence from joint French and British colonial rule in 1980. Like the majority of the Pacific's small island states, its economy relies heavily on foreign aid.¹³ Vanuatu is classified as the world's most at-risk country for natural hazards, being threatened in recent years by active tectonic phenomena such as earthquakes, eruptions, tsunamis, as well as the impacts of climate change in the form of rising sea levels and extreme weather.¹⁴

Despite economic and physical challenges the country has also been called 'the happiest place on earth' thanks to its strong traditional and community support system that contributes to high levels of wellbeing, and for its relatively low ecological footprint.¹⁵ Traditional systems of kinship ties, gift exchange and reciprocity, widely studied by anthropologists, have been challenged by urbanisation and the emergence of an increasingly cash-based economy.¹⁶ Within Vanuatu there is often a marked contrast between rural and urban livelihoods. Rural settlements typically rely on subsistence agriculture supplemented by cash incomes derived from copra, timber, cocoa and increasingly kava production, while urban centred populations in Port Vila and Luganville, depend on a cash economy mainly driven by the tourism industry.

13 In December 2020 Vanuatu 'graduated' from the Least Developed Country status. However, during 2019–2020, COVID-19 and the disappearance of international tourists have significantly affected the country's economy. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *The Least Developed Countries Report 2020* (New York: UN Publications, 2020).

14 *WorldRiskReport 2020* (Berlin & Bochum: Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft and Ruhr University Bochum–IFHV, 2020).

15 The Happy Planet Index is measured by using global data on life expectancy, wellbeing and a nation's ecological footprint. Vanuatu ranks first in 2006 and fourth in 2016. Saamah Abdallah, Juliet Michaelson, Nic Marks, Sam Thompson and Nicola Steuer, *The Happy Planet Index 2.0* (London: NEF, 2009). For the 2016 survey see <http://happyplanetindex.org/countries>.

16 See for example Margaret Jolly, Helen Lee, Katherine Lepani, Anna Naupa and Michelle Rooney, *Falling Through the Net? Gender and Social Protection in the Pacific. For Progress of the World's Women 2015–2016 Discussion Paper no. 6* (New York: UNWomen, 2015), 7.

In March 2015 Category Five Tropical Cyclone Pam hit Vanuatu leaving 75,000 people homeless and harming the livelihoods of over 40,000 households. It damaged and destroyed crops and community infrastructure, disrupting daily life and the local economy in Port Vila and across other parts of Vanuatu. The damage is estimated to have resulted in losses of around 1.6 billion Vatu, or the equivalent of approximately 19.75 million Australian dollars, in personal income.¹⁷ The elderly, those engaged in the informal economy, and those depending on subsistence livelihoods suffered in the post-disaster period due to reduced incomes and food sources. Women, prominent in both subsistence farming and in food, market and tourism businesses, faced significant constraints accessing finance and labour to repair their houses and businesses, reducing their capacity to generate income to provide food and other basic needs for their families.

In Vanuatu, post-disaster, there was a massive influx of aid organisations and expats in early 2015. Crosato and her then partner (who was working for an international aid organisation) were part of this temporary migration. Crosato's professional practice is based in socially engaged theatre for social and cultural resilience.¹⁸ Her approach is to facilitate shared creative practice and storytelling as a form of social action, using the strategies of social theatre to provide contexts of expression and communication for specific groups, usually presenting their work in a public space. This approach to transforming site and culturally specific oral storytelling into public performance aligns with performative mechanisms that Diana Taylor has described as 'vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called *twice-behaved behavior*'.¹⁹ After three years of undertaking such work as part of disaster recovery in Haiti, Crosato arrived in Vanuatu two months after TC Pam. Driven by curiosity and a desire to establish her own social networks, she undertook a personal mapping of people and

17 According to OCHA overall, an estimated 166,600 people were affected by the category five cyclone, with 75,000 people in need of shelter and 110,000 people with no access to safe drinking water. See <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/flash-appeal-launched-cyclone-affected-vanuatu>.

18 Crosato's work and past collaborations can be seen at www.marilenacrosato.com.

19 Diana Taylor, 'Translating Performance', *Profession* 7 (2002): 44–5; Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

places, exploring cultural spaces (libraries, cultural centres, artists' houses and collections, and so on), and meeting with local and foreign cultural personalities, civil society actors and researchers. Interested in developing a creative project to investigate women and power dynamics in the post-disaster recovery processes occurring across Vanuatu, Crosato tells the story of the establishment of the *Aelan Gel* project:

My attraction to the market manifested as an intuition. Soon after coming to Vanuatu, I began spending time in the Seaside Market House on the foreshore of downtown Port Vila, and met with the *mamas* who are cooks and managers of the small restaurant stalls on one side of the market. I introduced to them my previous work with social theatre and we decided to develop a project together.

The group shaped itself through a series of introductory meetings and shared time spent at the market. During this phase a lot of women approached our table discussing and carefully listening to the potential of the proposal and trying to figure out what that could mean for them. I started engaging individual women that were showing stronger interest, listening to their stories and everyday talk. Little by little a core group or 'inner public' as Wodiczko calls it, consolidated and we started sharing autobiographical memories.²⁰ Later I invited them to meet and play with improvisations. We began to deepen our mutual understanding and experiment with theatre techniques.²¹

Myriam, one of the leaders of the Local Restaurant Market House Association, had worked for several years at the Alliance Française, and then started her own business in the market. Crosato got to know her through eating at her market stall. Myriam had performed as a storyteller in the past, and was enthusiastic about the *Aelan Gel* project from the beginning. As a leader for the other *mamas*, her engagement helped to form a group identity around the project.

20 Krzysztof Wodiczko, 'The Inner Public', *Field 1* (Spring 2015).

21 Marilena Crosato, interviewed by Maya Haviland, Port Vila, 15 October 2015, recording and transcript held by Maya Haviland.

All the women who took part in the *Aelan Gel* project spoke Bislama, several local languages, and English or French at different levels. Communications were shaped by this complexity, with Crosato often speaking in both English and French and the group in Bislama. The people who were more at ease with foreign languages acted as informal translators, retelling stories told in Bislama into English or French. As the women grew more familiar with each other, the languages of improvisation and physical expression became more articulate and the group communicated through these physical expressions as well as through spoken word.

PLACE, ORALITY AND NI-VANUATU IDENTITY

Ni-Vanuatu identity has historically been presented by anthropologists in a way that emphasises the connection to place as fundamental and links identity to *kastom*.²² The pidgin word *kastom*, deriving from the English word custom, refers to traditional practices in everyday life. It embodies the knowledge of the people of Vanuatu, distinguishing the many different cultures of the archipelago. *Kastom* can be defined as expressions of national unity as well as regional diversity and a basis of identity.²³ In Port Vila migrants from other islands tend to group together in urban/peri-urban settlements, where they must pay to rent houses or, as Joanna Tamath said in the *Aelan Gel* performance, must ‘pay for everything’ as they do not have access to land for food gardens. Until recently, even young people born in Port Vila primarily identified themselves with their ancestral islands.²⁴ Those whose family lands are in the Port Vila area are positioned differently to these migrants.

Indigenous forms of social protection often involve unequal relations between women and men when caring for the young, the elderly and those with disability. While such

22 Joël Bonnemaison, *The Tree and the Canoe: History and Ethnogeography of Tanna* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); Margaret Jolly, *Women of the Place: Kastom, Colonialism and Gender in Vanuatu* (Chur & Philadelphia: Harwood Academic Press, 1994).

23 Roger Keesing and Robert Tonkinson (eds), *Reinventing Traditional Culture: The Politics of Kastom in Island Melanesia*. *Mankind* 13, no. 4 (Sydney: Anthropological Society of New South Wales, 1982); Lamont Lindstrom and Geoffrey White, *Culture, Kastom, Tradition: Developing Cultural Policy in Melanesia* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1994); Knut Rio and Edvard Hviding, ‘Pacific Made: Social Movements Between Cultural Heritage and the State’, in Edvard Hviding and Knut Rio (eds), *Made in Oceania: Social Movements, Cultural Heritage and the State in the Pacific* (Wantage, England: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2011).

24 Daniela Kraemer, ‘Planting Roots, Making Place: Urban Autochthony in Port Vila Vanuatu’, *Oceania* 90, no. 1 (2020): 40–54.

differences are transforming, they are still normalised in the everyday perception of gender roles widely prescribed by *kastom* and can be exacerbated in the urban setting. In towns, men engaged in the cash-based economy can more easily spend wages on personal consumption rather than household sustenance, care and protection, a theme that emerged in the stories of women told during the *Aelan Gel* project.²⁵

The construction of identity and the preservation of site-specific cultural roots is largely based on orality and intergenerational transmission. Oral tradition plays a significant role in shaping identities, but also recreates the past. The narration of individual and collective memories dialogues with ongoing social transformations and their meanings in Vanuatu. Ni-Vanuatu archaeologist and director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre Richard Shing has described oral traditions as the symbolic structure that organises the practical meaning of everyday life and allows one to orient oneself in the world:

It is the means by which people communicate with their ancestors; it is the means by which both sacred and communal knowledge can be passed on. Codes of ethics, morality and correct manners of respect are all obtained through the passing of knowledge through word of mouth. Thus, oral tradition, to an indigenous Ni-Vanuatu, does not only provide instructions as to how one could live a better way of life, it is also the means by which we live and survive day by day. It is our definition of life.²⁶

The idea of place and island-based identity are a legitimising basis for *kastom*, ensuring that islands of origin maintain their centrality along one's lifetime but also across generations of families on the move.²⁷ For urban communities in Port Vila, island-based identity continues to be a powerful source of social norms, organising

25 Jolly et al., *Falling Through the Net?*, 46.

26 Richard Shing, 'Oral Tradition in Vanuatu and Its Importance from an Historical Perspective', in Paul de Deckker, Christophe Sand and Frederic Angleviel (eds), *The New Pacific Review. Proceedings of the 16th Pacific History Association Conference*, vol. 3 (Canberra: The Australian National University 2004), 199.

27 Ethnography of communities from Tanna island living in Port Vila provides ample evidence of island-based identity in action. See Lamont Lindstrom, 'Urbane Tannese: Local Perspectives on Settlement Life in Port Vila', *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 133 (2011): 255–66.

social life in areas such as residence, exchange networks, ritual, justice and knowledge transmission. It is, however, a plural, flexible identity, incorporating the ‘simultaneous understanding of the process and history of relationships between people, groups and places up to that point, as well as the simultaneous appearance of town and island’.²⁸

THE SEASIDE MARKET HOUSE

The Port Vila Seaside Market House is one of the few public spaces in Port Vila where the cultural diversity and layered urban complexity of contemporary Vanuatu are visible to the observant cultural outsider. Open 24 hours a day, six days a week, women and children live out their days in the market.²⁹ Many who travel from rural areas around the island of Efate to sell their goods also sleep there. Trade, interactions and casual meetings happen. The murmur of some of Vanuatu’s over 100 indigenous languages mixes with Bislama, and conversations in English and French evoke the legacies of Vanuatu’s colonial past.³⁰

The market’s businesses are mainly run by women. As emphasised by recent studies, marketplaces are a main source of income activity for women in Vanuatu and play a critical role in food security. Markets have been shown to contribute important social and economic strengths for women, associated with their physical spaces and mutual aid through their formal and informal social networks.³¹ The Seaside Market House in Port Vila and its flourishing associations offer important venues to effect women’s social and economic change, and to support women’s leadership.

28 Benedicta Rousseau, ‘The Achievement of Simultaneity: *Kastom* and Place in Port Vila, Vanuatu’, *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 144–145 (2017): 41.

29 Please note this paper is drawn from work undertaken in 2015–2018 prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic which has, at least temporarily, changed the nature and function of the Market House.

30 Bislama is the official ‘creole’ language of Vanuatu, along with English and French. It is often the first language of many of the Ni-Vanuatu living in urban centres and the second language of much of the rest of the country’s population.

31 Karen E. McNamara, Rachel Clissold and Ross Westoby, ‘Marketplaces as Sites for the Development-adaptation-disaster Trifecta: Insights from Vanuatu’, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 61, no. 3 (2020): 566–76.



Figure 1 *Aelan Gel* performers interact with a market vendor before the performance *Aelan Gel*, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Murray Lloyd.

THE AELAN GEL'S APPROACH TO STORYTELLING

THE AELAN GEL GROUP

The *Aelan Gel* group emerged out of some of these women's networks, linked through the public space of the Seaside Market House. The project was developed on a voluntary basis without significant financial support.³² The group's 13 women came from three local associations: the Local Restaurant Market House, the Farmer's Association Market House and the Vanuatu Young Women for Change. All were interested in carving out a space in the cultural field of Port Vila around themes to do with resilience and women's roles.

As the group took shape, an emotional bond and mutual understanding grew through everyday interactions in the informality of the meetings at the market: cultural and individual differences were explicitly acknowledged and assimilated;

³² The group partnered with the Alliance Française who provided rehearsal space and a small grant to produce the video about the project. Crosato produced the show and the women didn't get reimbursement or compensation for the rehearsals. The group held a meeting at the end of the project to discuss the administrative balance and to share the donations received during the free performances.

personal experiences and views were shared and discussed in relation to the lived realities of women's lives in Vanuatu. The deeper issues women continue to live with became a stronger creative driver than the immediate challenges of disaster response. The Global 16 Days Campaign was identified as an effective way to frame women's experiences within both the global framework and within local events.³³

Aged between 16 and 60, the participants established an intergenerational dynamic based on knowledge and advice transmission from the elders to the younger women. The older women, owners or managers of small businesses at the market, became role models for the younger women in the group. This intergenerational dynamic was reflected in the *Aelan Gel* performance. In the first story, Joanna teaches her most popular cooking recipe to the youngest participant, Christina, while inviting the audience to sit and listen to the women telling their stories.

Joanna: Good afternoon to everyone who came to the market. I invite you all to take a chair and listen to our story. Today, I'm going to show you a recipe, the *blanquette*. (...)

Christina: Mami, for how many hours should the *blanquette* be cooked?

Joanna: One hour and a half. Christina, taste, mmm! It's good! This is how to prepare a *blanquette* in a kitchen like that of the market. If you want to try it ... here you go!³⁴

In addition to the transmission of stories from older to younger, the horizontal nature of the participatory process through which *Aelan Gel* was devised gave a rare opportunity for young women to be listened to by older women. This process of storytelling and listening allowed younger women in the group to identify with, and assume a role in, a shared narrative, underscoring issues about women's place in

33 A description of the events that took place in Port Vila for the Global 16 Days Campaign in 2015 can be found in Angelina Penner, *Wanem ia jenda? [What is Gender?]: Translations and (Mis)Understandings between Development Discourse & Everyday Life Experiences in Port Vila, Vanuatu* (Bergen: The University of Bergen, 2017).

34 English translation by Crosato from the original text, Crosato et al., *Aelan Gel*, 17.

a rapidly transforming urban setting. One of the stories told by Eunice, a story of violence against a girl, focused on the mobile phone as a tool used by men to control their partners.³⁵

Eunice: That's what we saw! We felt sorry for the girl who was crying, and this problem came from a telephone issue. Nowadays the telephone can be a cause of violence!³⁶



Figure 2 During the performance of *Aelan Gel*, coffee and a tasting of blanquette are served to the audience, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Murray Lloyd.

SHARING INDIVIDUAL STORIES, SHAPING COLLECTIVE CULTURAL ACTION

In working with non-professional actors and storytellers, Crosato strives to transform the lack of professional experience, infrastructure and technical equipment into creative strengths. Her social theatre practice had previously developed in Colombia and Haiti where she concentrated on narratives of life experiences and

³⁵ Mobile phones have been described by Taylor as objects having an agency that extends beyond their immediate capacities as devices of telecommunication. Mobile communication technology has been found to be linked to concerns around sexual liaisons among young people, extramarital affairs, and gender-based power dynamics. See John P. Taylor, 'Drinking Money and Pulling Women: Mobile Phone Talk, Gender, and Agency in Vanuatu', *Anthropological Forum* 26, no. 1 (2015), 7.

³⁶ English translation by Crosato from the original text, Crosato et al., *Aelan Gel*, 27.

oral storytelling to bring non-professionals to performance and to support groups built around communities of interest to find a collective public voice. Questions that drive her practice include ‘How to make creative works that are relevant to real-world conditions?’ and ‘How to bring real-life issues, cultural realities and real people to performance?’³⁷

Crosato consolidated the steps in her practice in Haiti where she facilitated seven separate creative community initiatives to public performance.³⁸ Beginning with autobiographic storytelling, the group is led to identify a main theme or axis of research. Next, through processes of creative retelling and layered storytelling, the stories become progressively oriented around key themes and ideas and the group finds its collective voice. Now, an oral script begins to take shape in rehearsals, where the stories are repeated, exchanged and played with. The group begins to compose new forms, mixing fictional and autobiographical elements and arrives at a final oral script, without the need for any written support. The focus is on telling and retelling, moving from the autobiographical to the shared narrative, performing and re-performing until the narrative belongs to the group and the context in which they seek to perform.

This approach makes projects accessible to people from diverse backgrounds and educational experiences. Everyone can be part of what Crosato calls an ‘experimental community’, a group that is constituted by the encounter between artists and local communities aggregated around common identity markers – a set of values, a need for change, a message to communicate. Creative works arise in this ‘experimental community’ through the collaboration of different people and their knowledge, and take a different path each time.

37 The tensions caused by the inclusion of non-professionals in co-creative art practices is considered by both practitioners and theorists, see for example: Haviland, *Side by Side?*, 82–110. See also Claire Bishop, ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents’, *Artforum International* 44, no. 6 (2006): 178–83 and Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2008).

38 Crosato lived in Haiti from 2013 to 2015, based in Grand Goave, Leogane and Port au Prince. There, she began reflecting on the relationship with the place and the responsibility of the artist.

In Haiti, where in 2010 a 7.0 magnitude earthquake killed 200,000 people and left 1.5 million people homeless, this form of collective narration proved to be useful for individual empowerment and collective resilience in the disaster recovery phase. Participants found the process helped them to re-find and experience the sense of community that had become precarious due to the disaster. As Jack Saul has articulated, creative connections to collective action can be of significant value in building resilience in the face of personal or collective impacts from disruptive events.³⁹

The overarching goal of Crosato's creative practice is supporting individual and collective agency in the face of social challenges. The suite of creative development activities which she applied to work in Haiti and in Vanuatu, allow for adaptation to local cultural contexts and framings of social and political realities. In Vanuatu the narrative of 'disaster recovery' was encompassed by a stronger group interest in the agency and visibility of women's experiences.

How specific techniques resonate with a particular group and cultural context varies. In the early stages of the *Aelan Gel* creative process, Crosato reflected on the differences between working with women in Haiti and with the group in Vanuatu. She noted how histories of international aid, foreign research and development in each place had differently shaped self-representation of women and perceptions of their needs, expectations of payment and collaboration in aspects of the creative process.

As an artist I was curious. *Aelan Gel* was to be my first intervention in Vanuatu. How would my methodology work in this cultural context? How would a deep participatory process be received in the post-disaster realities of Vanuatu? For the group of women who decided to participate there was a strong curiosity as well. What would they discover in this new world of theatre, performance and storytelling? How would this initiative make their

39 'Cycles of collective action in public space, communal activities, reflection, and narration are all cited as important process in recovery to enable the development of collective resilience'. Saul, *Collective Trauma Collective Healing*, 2.

voices heard in public, and what would this kind of social engagement mean for them?⁴⁰

In Haiti, with its long history of dependency on international aid exacerbated after the 2010 earthquake, it was relatively easy to find an institutional framework to develop social theatre projects that assisted individuals to re-find and experience a sense of community. However, during the theatre workshops, the team-building and trust-building exercises required a longer time for the participants to experience safety and collective support through simple actions, revealing the extent to which such experiences of collective support and safety were not part of their everyday life. Safety emerged as an important factor in setting performances in public places, something that had to be carefully negotiated with community leaders and other stakeholders.

In Vanuatu post-disaster, where community bonds were still strong, women's individual and collective resources were an orienting theme in *Aelan Gel*. The project became one of working in between – between the formal structures of organisations and cultural recovery programs and the lives of the women; between the lunch and dinner hours of the market restaurants, in between tables of each *mama's* stall; between generations of women and their languages; between rural memories and urban life.

STORYTELLING IN PLACE

The creative process took place over two months, sometimes in a nearby rehearsal space when the group's storytelling sessions required privacy and active listening, and sometimes in the market where the movements, actions and scenography of the performance were shaped. Crosato reflects:

We started the co-creative process without written text, aesthetic ideas about staging or any message to predetermine the content of the final performance. We simply began with a question: 'What do we know and think about the

⁴⁰ Marilena Crosato, 15 October 2015.

lives of women, power and violence?’ We brought to this the richness of personal experiences and stories. We talked and played together.⁴¹

While the project was taking shape, the market’s economy slowly regained its strength, as a variety of products and newly grown crops began to refill the stalls. This recovery fed the creative project, drawing out the adversity-activated development that characterised the lived experiences of many of the women after crisis.⁴² Stories came forth reflecting on expressions and experiences of resilience, shaping a direction for the overall narrative. For example, the following statement made by Ryndo:

My name is Ryndo and I come from the island of Tanna. My husband divorced me, I had to pay school fees for my children, but I didn’t have enough money, so I came to Port Vila to look for work, but there was no work. I went to my family and they gave me a piece of land to make a vegetable garden. Then I came to the city to sell the products from my garden to pay the children’s school fees. Now I pay for books, clothes, school materials, food ...⁴³

Approaching the topics of women, power and violence from a personal perspective revealed the group’s common problems and values. Strategies that women were able to put in place to respond to the logic and obstacles of power began emerging from their stories and the witnessing of each other’s stories. Autobiographic narrations and shared observations link ethnographic practice with theatre and local culture.⁴⁴ Traditional storytelling styles emerged across the group, offering a pathway into performer–audience interaction, a key principle of theatre practice. Call and

41 Marilena Crosato, 15 October 2015.

42 There are many accounts of Ni-Vanuatu reaction to the natural adversity caused by the cyclone. See Tony Rey, Loic Le De, Frederic Leone and David Gilbert, ‘An Integrative Approach to Understand Vulnerability and Resilience Post-disaster: The 2015 Cyclone Pam in Urban Vanuatu as Case Study’, *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal* 26 (2017): 268. Reno Papadopoulos analyses ‘new positive developments that have been activated by the person’s very exposure to adversity’, in ‘Refugees, Trauma and Adversity-activated Development’, *European Journal of Psychotherapy and Counselling* 9, no. 3 (2007): 306.

43 English translation by Crosato from the original text, Crosato et al., *Aelan Gel*, 19.

44 Autobiographic narrations in theatre have been elaborated in different ways in the monologues of Italian narrative theatre. See for example Gerardo Guccini (ed.), *La bottega dei narratori* (Roma: Dino Audino Editore, 2005). See also James Clifford, *Routes – Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press, 1997).

response, names and descriptions of places, third-person dialogues, moral and practical advice given to the youth, and the presence of music melodies characterised the storytelling styles.⁴⁵ The stories became the common social and creative ground of discussion, carrying layers of past and present, symbolism and reality, authentic experience and creative representation.



Figure 3 Aelan Gel performers, the final scene, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Marilena Crosato.

The approach supported the women to share and gather stories on the themes of gender, power hardship and resilience through conversation and story circles characterised by a non-judgemental environment and active listening. Storytelling and guided discussions about what the group members were observing in their own lives and more widely in the Ni-Vanuatu social environment were a starting point. On the one hand autobiographic stories brought the group to know about the island-based identity of each participant's memories, knowledge and roots. On the other

⁴⁵ Lamont Lindstorm highlights how in Vanuatu songs, like stories, are part of the custom tradition and help fix historical events in collective memory. For example, 'Big Wok: The Vanuatu Cultural Centre's World War Two Ethnohistory Project', in John Taylor and Nick Thieberger (eds), *Working Together in Vanuatu: Research Histories, Collaborations, Projects and Reflections* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2011), 54.

hand, returning to life in the market kept the work rooted in the present, with the challenges the women were facing as female business owners after TC Pam.

Oral narration was used as a tool to develop content and to build public-speaking confidence in the performers. It was often combined with physical games and voice exercises, from a repertoire developed through training and practice and refined in cross-cultural contexts.⁴⁶ In addition to storytelling, image-theatre – a technique that represents social situations and analyses their underlying dynamics by composing living pictures – was a way to lead the group from realistic to symbolic forms of representation.⁴⁷ With each workshop the *Aelan Gel* women drew more of their own ways of working together into the process. Together they shaped a replicable text through repetition, giving each other feedback on style and content of performance, discussing the intricacies of story and expression, taking charge of the group dynamics, translating – literally and metaphorically – across differences of age, language and experience.

The group was formed by a mix of women of different ages and different cultures, not linked to a single *kastom* identity. Women brought different approaches to their storytelling, and the group worked with different kinds of stories – personal, observed or overheard, as well as traditional *kastom* stories.⁴⁸ Over time the diversity in the group proved to be a key strength of the creative process. Autobiographic storytelling mixed with fictionalisation and the overlaying of different women's stories became a strategic process, giving participants the freedom to shape their messages and challenge audiences' preconceived ideas about women's creative self-expression and revelation. The group made conscious choices to push back on stereotypical narratives of an affected group in the phase of early recovery after a natural disaster.

46 See Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe* (London: Routledge, 1994); Claudio Bernardi, *Il teatro sociale. L'arte tra disagio e cura* (Rome: Carocci, 1994); Jacques Lecoq, *Le Corps poétique, un enseignement de la création théâtrale* (Arles: Actes Sud-Papiers, 1997); Santiago García, *Teoría y práctica del teatro* (Bogota: Ediciones Teatro la Candelaria, 1983).

47 Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-actors* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

48 One issue specific to Vanuatu *kastom* culture and storytelling is related to story ownership. This is particularly so with *kastom* stories. See Lindstrom, 'Big Wok', 49–50.

The project's creative approach and workshop process danced between autobiographic memories, fictionalised stories and public and private spaces and relationships, much in the way that the market restaurants straddle public and private for the women who own and cook in them. The choice to develop part of the creation process in a public space had multiple functions, disrupting the routine of people passing by and offering customers and other workers a moment to listen to the women, to agree or disagree with them, to recognise themselves in the stories that were told. The dynamism of the market also offered a first audience to the group, helping them to associate new meanings and new memories to their usual workplace and progressively internalising a new public social role.



Figure 4 Audience members at the long table during *Aelan Gel* performance in the market, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Murray Lloyd.

These processes of co-creation and collective decision-making shaped the content of the performance and its form. Through the process of storytelling, listening, theatre games and exercises, the group transitioned from abstract values and general ideas and started uncovering new insights into women's lives in contemporary Port Vila. In addition to the widespread presence of gender-based violence across the stories, the struggle to pay school fees unified all the mothers within the group and the

importance of education was articulated as a tool to generate and resist power. As these themes emerged, the group chose which woman's story best represented their common experiences of the pride felt in succeeding in sending children to school thanks to the hard work at the market.

Anna's story was chosen by the group because she was offering to all her seven children a good education – a huge accomplishment in Vanuatu. In this local context her story aroused great admiration and respect. Anna, who had always considered her work a necessity caused by her own lack of education, started to significantly change her way of behaving with customers and authorities, gaining self-confidence and leadership skills during the months following the *Aelan Gel* project.⁴⁹

AELAN GEL, STORIES OF VIOLENCE AND RESILIENCE

Aesthetic choices came from physical improvisations, rehearsals and long hours spent observing market life. In the market, privacy is carved out through strategic positioning of tables, delineated by mats or benches, cloths draped over objects or sleeping people. *Aelan Gel* drew on these methods and symbols. The stage was set as a long table at the centre of the market, a swing hung at the entrance to the restaurant area and a bench was used to display everyday objects evoking stories of daily life and violence: a bottle and a beer can; a kava bowl; a box of matches; cigarettes; chilli pepper; scissors; small and large knives; a stone; a meat pestle and a hammer.⁵⁰ All these objects emerged in the narrations and some of them were set as protagonists of the stories. This choice was in line with Vanuatu being described by Taylor as 'a cultural milieu in which material objects such as stones or houses may be sentient and agentive'.⁵¹ Objects evoking tradition and rural life were placed next to objects

49 Marilena Crosato, interviewed by Maya Haviland, Port Vila, 15 January 2016, recording and transcript held by Maya Haviland.

50 Kava is a culturally important drink in Vanuatu which has psychoactive effects, mainly sedative. Originally, the consumption of kava was linked to ceremonies and rituals. Nowadays, kava has been commercialised and can be purchased in 'kava bars'. See John P. Taylor, 'Janus and the Siren's Call: Kava and the Articulation of Gender and Modernity in Vanuatu', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16, no. 2 (2010): 279–296.

51 'The idea of *man ples* (place-based identity) and of being firmly rooted in the land like a banyan tree is highly valued. Related to this, while purposeful journeying is positively valued, aimless wandering is generally deplored and considered both unhealthy and dangerous. (*continued over page*)

from contemporary life merging and acquiring new meanings. Everyday objects activate a range of sensations and emotions related to personal stories, giving life to relationships and images that are intertwined with the living narratives of one's own cultural environment. In the extraordinary space of the theatrical scene, objects encourage imagination and identification, mediating access to an intermediate space between reality and illusion, social normativity and creation.⁵²



Figure 5 Objects of violence displayed on a bench during the performance, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Marilena Crosato.

At the beginning of the *Aelan Gel* performance, a swing in motion marked the rhythm of a children's song, echoing from the women's memories, sung as a call to the market's vendors and customers to gather around the performance space.

This is especially the case for women. Not only are women's actions – in this case involving sexual behaviour especially – controlled by men, but they must also face or otherwise live out the moral consequences of such actions. While mobile phones themselves may indeed provide a useful tool for social change, such as in the empowerment of women, the meanings and narratives that surround them may by marked contrast entail much more negative continuations of already existing relations of power and inequality.' Taylor, 'Drinking Money and Pulling Women', 7.

52 Donald W. Winnicott analyses transitional objects and their role in the child's psychosocial development and transitional phenomena in the adult's life. See Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena – A Study of the First Not-Me Possession', *International Journal Psychoanalysis* 34 (1953): 91.

Through the swing and the music, a dimension of intimacy was brought into the public space of the marketplace, in which the nostalgia of childhood became the voice of the women unified in a single stream of music. Following the same melody, the names of the islands of origin were called out, enriched by the personal memories of their beauty and their products.

Johanna: I come from a small island near Mallicollo, Atchin. I love my island, because we have small pirogues with which we catch fish to make *laplap sosor*, mmm!⁵³

Baskets, fruits and yams that are sold at the market, as well as volcanoes and pirogues that appear in the narrations, are the marks of identity of the women circulating between different locations and cultures in the Pacific.⁵⁴



Figure 6 *Aelan Gel* performers on the swing in the opening scene, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Murray Lloyd.

53 English translation by Crosato from the original text, Crosato et al., *Aelan Gel*, 16.

54 See for example Marilyn Strathern, *Partial Connections* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991), 135.

Once the audience had gathered and focused their attention, they were invited to sit around the long table and listen to the performers' stories. The recipe of a local dish, usually served at the market, introduced the voices of the women. They told how they arrived in Port Vila, faced difficulties, and sought support from their families, how they managed to work at the market and have their children enrolled at school.

The stories in the register of everyday life introduce tensions and violence. Hidden or visible, violence is always latent and it reveals something about Ni-Vanuatu society by the way the women react to it. Myriam, one of the performers, told of collecting stones on a beach and seeing a girl being chased by a man with a knife. Fearing for the girl's life, in front of a community unable to intervene, she starts throwing the little stones at the man. She manages to hit him and push the man away. She comes to be called the 'Stone Woman' by the people of this village.

Myriam: I gathered these little stones because I found them nice, black and white, round. I wanted to put them in my room as a decoration.⁵⁵

Parts of the performance were first-person narratives about how each woman came to cook in the market, sharing the challenges related to business and economic independence in the context of divorce, illness, distance from family, while celebrating the independence that these businesses provide.

Anna: The people of Pentecost didn't know what a market was and my father explained it to them. He spoke with the chiefs about this project. Then those who had pigs brought them, as well as those who had chickens. Those who had yam, taro, sugar cane and cabbage brought their products and my father explained to them how to make a market. My father showed them how to put a price on their products and sell them, and now all the people of Pentecost know how to work for the market.⁵⁶

These stories were performed as intimate confidences given across the table to the audience. Other elements of the show were partially fictionalised performances, enacting

55 English translation by Crosato from the original text, Crosato et al., *Aelan Gel*, 30.

56 English translation by Crosato from the original text, Crosato et al., *Aelan Gel*, 22.

archetypal stories of violence bubbling under the surface of social interactions, drawn from a range of stories told in workshop and rehearsal. Using fictionalised versions of lived experience protected the confidences of individuals and distilled common experiences. Processes of fictionalisation enabled performances that embodied the humour used in real life to diffuse and deflect violence in the urban spaces of Port Vila, while echoing the comedy of TV soap opera. Included also were stylised moments of physical and voice performance where the women moved as one, speaking directly to the themes of empowerment and participation that had threaded through the women's stories in the workshops.

During the making of *Aelan Gel* the women had been inspired by a poem by the Ni-Vanuatu poet and politician Grace Mera Molisa. A poet, publisher and political figure in Vanuatu, Molisa was integral to the women's movement in Vanuatu and in the Pacific.⁵⁷ The last part of the *Aelan Gel* performance opened with a two-voice reading of Molisa's poem 'Delightful Acquiescence'.⁵⁸ The women united in a group, whispering with a stylised strength, enacting the final message the women articulated: a claim for space in the political and public arena, a self-affirmation of their social role within the family and in the public sphere.

Myriam: We want all Ni-Vanuatu women to stop being silent.

Eunice: Stop being quiet.

Myriam: We must talk about it.

All: Politics, school, health, respect, violence, money, peace, happiness, business, love, *kastom*, family, joy, religion, sport, music ...

Myriam: Everything, everything!

We want all Ni-Vanuatu women not to be afraid.⁵⁹

57 Molisa was the first Ni-Vanuatu woman awarded a university degree, the only woman member of the National Constitution Committee and a signatory to the Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu in 1979. As founding member of Transparency International and Vanuatu's National Arts Festival, she published the voices of indigenous Pacific women through her press, Blackstone Publishing.

58 While the whole performance was played in Bislama, the poem was read in Bislama and in its original language, English. Grace Mera Molisa, *Black Stone II* (Port Vila: Black Stone Publications and Vanuatu University Pacific Centre, 1989), 24.

59 English translation by Crosato. Crosato et al., *Aelan Gel*, 34.



Figure 7 Aelan Gel performer Ethline Dick reads Grace Mera Molisa's poem, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Groovy Banana.

AUDIENCE RESPONSES

The process of gathering and considering stories and the lived experiences of women in Port Vila in late 2015 was a political act. In Vanuatu there are very high rates of violence against women across all provinces, age groups, education levels and religions. The women who took part in the project were highly aware of the political nature of their process and they made considered and strategic choices about the nature of their public intervention.⁶⁰

The role of women in dealing with violence in different circumstances was illustrated in a non-conventional way;

they pictured themselves as proactive characters managing to solve critical situations. They also explored the dynamics of violence between women. The choice to perform in the public space of the market, the workplace of many of the women in the group, showed the women in a different capacity to the cooks and business women that they were known as. The group had to consider how much of their personal stories should be told and what the implications might be of the ways in which they were presented.

The simple action of performing in a public space was a meaningful intervention about the role of women in public and political life in Vanuatu.⁶¹ The choice to

60 As shown by a study from the Vanuatu National Statistics Office: 'The prevalence of intimate partner violence in Vanuatu is among the highest in the world ... For most women who experience physical or sexual violence, it occurs frequently, and it is often very severe'. *Vanuatu National Survey on Women's Lives and Family Relationships* (Port Vila: Vanuatu Women's Centre, 2011), 181.

61 The National Parliament of Vanuatu has 52 members. Since Independence, only five women have been elected to Parliament and at the time of writing there are no women in the Parliament.

perform in the market, a space dominated by working women, amplified the communication the women were making with their words and bodies. The performance brought forth the market as a key cultural space in the city – albeit one distinct from the more officially recognised cultural spaces of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and the French embassy or the local theatre of Wan Smolbag.

The final performance of *Aelan Gel* was staged for an invited audience in the market at noon on a weekday, in the middle of the busiest time for the market restaurants. It was performed as part of an international book fair held by the Alliance Française in Port Vila. The literary event spilled into the quotidian spaces of market life. Audience members sat at the long table and formed another circle of performance. They had their own audience of passers-by and customers seeking a meal from their usual stall. For the *Aelan Gel* women a further performance staged at the Alliance Française, a few blocks away from the market, held great personal and social importance, bringing them literally centrestage within an established cultural space in Vanuatu.



Figure 8 *Aelan Gel* performer telling a story at the table with the audience, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Maya Haviland.

At each performance audience members were moved to tears and laughter, with a solemn reverence descending during the speaking of Molisa's poem; it was evident that the poem played a crucial role in establishing the validity of the whole artistic intervention. For those who had perhaps never considered local women working at the market as intellectually engaged, the use of the poem was a demonstration of how the *Aelan Gel* women carry complex reflections on Ni-Vanuatu society and are alive to a range of cultural influences and references.

Not all audience members responded in the same way to the mixture of personal story, creative non-fiction and stylised performance. While the content and form of the artistic work provided action and commentary on the social and political life of urban women in Vanuatu, the moment of performance (when the group met the audience) was its own moment of research and discovery about perceptions of women. Some responses revealed the discomforts that the mixing of creative arts with ethnographic stories can pose to audiences, whose expectations of 'authenticity', 'cultural identity' and 'truth' can be challenged by the tools of creative production, and the hybrid stories that emerge from collaborative and co-creative processes.⁶²

One Ni-Vanuatu man, who participated in a round-table discussion about the performance at the Alliance Française, criticised the women for not engaging more directly with their *kastom* identities in the work. His comments revealed uneasiness with the hybrid identities presented by the women – as modern business owners, urban dwellers with island roots, mothers, sisters and workers – living in the in-between space of contemporary Vanuatu where *kastom* and contemporary life mix in the realities of family, economic necessities and changing opportunities. Another audience member, an expat with powerful influence in the cultural scene of Port Vila, expressed her disappointment that the show did not tell the 'hard' stories of women's lives. She was expecting, perhaps, a form of social realism that the group itself had intentionally chosen to subvert, in favour of a creative production that distilled the experiences and narratives of many, and challenged assumptions of

⁶² Haviland, *Side by Side?*, 82–110.

victimhood and the simplified stereotypes around the causes and experiences of violence against women.

FROM ORALITY TO WRITTEN TEXT

The ripples of *Aelan Gel* spread into different art forms and forums. A documentary video about the project was produced by local media-making association Further Arts, a photographic exhibition displayed images from the performances and the artist Julie Sauerwein, inspired by *Aelan Gel*, captured the social and political messages put forward in the show. Her work of art was displayed during an exhibition held for International Women's Day. From early on the project provided a catalyst for local and international artists: photographers, researchers, video-makers, designers and musicians. In part this reflected the energy that co-creative processes, drawn from lived experience, can generate. This was especially true in contexts such as Port Vila post TC Pam, where the enthusiasm for the project demonstrated how grassroots creativity and cultural representations were sought out and valued by a community in the process of recovery.



Figure 9 *Aelan Gel* poster created for International Women's Day 2016, by Julie Sauerwein.

As the simple idea of *Aelan Gel* grew into a range of other creative outputs, the group took the decision to collectively write and edit a script drawn from the performance. It was intended as a lasting testimony of the project, and an example of how authorship and literature are accessible to Ni-Vanuatu women and oral storytellers. Over the year following the performance the group transcribed and edited *Aelan Gel* for multi-lingual publication through the Alliance Française in Port Vila. Grace Molisa remained a source of inspiration: in over 35 years of independence there had never been more than

two female representatives in Parliament and few Ni-Vanuatu women were provided with literary opportunities. After the publication of the *Aelan Gel* book, other publications have been offering space for female writers in the form of anthologies and other texts.⁶³

The process of turning the live performance into a written text empowered the women as writers. The group discussed how to transpose an oral text and ephemeral performance into written form, making it accessible to a wider audience. This was the third step of the process that started from sharing individual stories in the private space, to their translation and transformation in a collective performance displayed in the public space, and then translation into written literature.

The writing process took place at the market, in the quieter hours during which women are cleaning their kitchens and preparing for dinner customers. A smaller core group consolidated around the writing initiative. Those who were able to write assisted Crosato in writing in Bislama and those who had the best memory helped to recall the words used in the performance accurately. The group worked on refining the text, producing several drafts that were printed and read aloud at the market. A new awareness was raised, through discussions of keywords and paragraphs and the choices made for a written text as distinct from those spoken in live performance. The women knew they were making a book that would enter them in the national literature. This process of drafting, printing, reading aloud and discussing text choices happened several times, until the final text was ready.⁶⁴

In 2018 the book was launched at the national book fair 'Pirogue' with the participation of all the authors. In the women's accounts, shared two years after the performance, many of them linked the *Aelan Gel* experience to choices they made

63 Various authors, *VOES* (Port Vila: Alliance Française, 2020).

64 Co-authorship and ownership were discussed as well, including the names of all the performers/creators and of the smaller group that collectively wrote the text. Alliance Française's team, with their expertise in publishing texts in Bislama and translating into French, supported the group in the editing process. The visual artist Julie Sauerwein designed the project graphically.

subsequently.⁶⁵ The leader of the Local Restaurant Market House Association, Myriam Malao, for example, had gotten into politics. She regularly mentioned that the *Aelan Gel* experience contributed to her confidence to make this choice, as well as giving her public visibility that helped her political life.⁶⁶ Five years later Myriam described the transformative value of *Aelan Gel*'s experience as a volcano having the power of entering women's words and aspirations into the public debate.⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

We have drawn on the experiences of the *Aelan Gel* project to explore an approach to using oral history and storytelling as a foundation for social and cultural action, in this specific case with a group of women in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Storytellers participated in iterative cycles of creative production that drew out the specifics of lived experience and shared autobiographical narratives. They worked collectively to co-create site-specific socially engaged performance, and, over time, generate a collective text intended for an enduring place in the literary and cultural history of women in Vanuatu.

In this project about women's experiences of resilience and forms of violence in a post-disaster context, place, so central in Ni-Vanuatu identity, was presented through memories and objects that emerged as characters in the narrations and stories, told and retold as the project evolved. Place was both character and setting, used to invoke deeper empathetic understandings of the lived experiences of women and their agency. The role of devising and performing the creative work in a specific site, namely the Seaside Market House in Port Vila, added another dimension to the social intervention of storytelling by women, enabling interactions and attribution

65 Anna Pakoa, interviewed by Marilena Crosato, Port Vila, 19 April 2018, recording and transcript held by Marilena Crosato.

66 Myriam Malao, interviewed by Marilena Crosato, Port Vila, 20 April 2018, recording and transcript held by Marilena Crosato.

67 On 26 March 2021, Myriam took part in the audio documentary dedicated to Vanuatu in Radio Canada's *Immersion* series. She performed the story of the 'Stone Woman' from *Aelan Gel* and she added: '[*Aelan Gel*] has been for us a way to put the *mamas* in front, to break that silence, to really come out of nowhere [...] in the form of a volcano. You know, when there is a volcano that comes out of nowhere and starts to simmer and spill out, it is a fact and it means something. [*Aelan Gel*] had an impact that made boom, that's it. The cyclone passed'. English translation by Crosato from the interview in French.

of meanings for a wider community through the repositioning and temporary repurposing of a familiar public space.

The experience of *Aelan Gel* demonstrates how collaborative theatrical action, informed by oral storytelling and collaborative ethnography, can become a meeting space for different types of knowledge, skills and people. As we work together, artists, community members and audiences become an ‘experimental community’, as well as a creative one. The creation and presentation of a socially engaged performance work, drawn from autobiographical stories, seeks to activate the thoughts of those involved in the creative process and of the audience, not to convince or manipulate, but to provide a context in which they may take a stand with respect to what they are seeing and are involved in.

In this landscape the stories told by the women and the creative work as a whole are not just aesthetic objects or presentations of knowledge, but forms of relationship. Their artistic success is linked to the success of the dialogue provoked with and within the public. This public is formed by placing the work in spaces of cultural significance to the life of the city from which the stories are drawn.

The use of oral stories generated in the period of disaster recovery developed a critique of the stereotyped representations of women as carriers of traditional values or victims of human rights violations. These new narratives, supported by co-creative choices of the group, illuminated the present, provoked reactions, highlighted issues, and showed directions towards the future.