

An Oceanic Nation

Karin Ingersoll

The heels of my once proud shoes punctured rectangular wounds into the earth as I walked my evening route home through an obscure geography of gravel and marsh. With the sun still hovering above the tree line, sweat moistened my broad forehead and dampened the armpits of my mustard-colored suit. The sisal factories were screaming as usual, the machine's cries pulsating in my head as the heat so often did. I imagined demons living in the machines, screeching. A dreadful reality. Yet being a legal consultant to small businesses was not proving to be a more glamorous or noble profession than working on the mass exportation of sisal from the demon-filled factories, no matter what we were told.

On most evenings I kept my eyes low, my mind idle, and my feet on the road. Tonight, however, my eyes wandered, my mind wondered, and my feet led. The consequences were incalculable.

Here on my island, which my mother's ancestors first inhabited centuries ago, the indigenous vitie bird has forever been a beloved symbol of our island's pride and unique beauty. In our Oceanic nation, however, through the years of colonization and since our independence some thirty years ago, the vitie has somehow become the focus of our people's most practiced pastime, the patag fight. I had never actually witnessed a patag. When I was a little girl my mother would not allow me to be exposed to such violence. "It brings savages out of people," she would say.

Quite aware of my "hybrid" identity (native mother and western father—a peerless and yet almost envied image), I hesitantly approached a group of huddled backs, bobbing heads, and raised arms gathered to watch a patag. Nearing the circle, I met dark stares from dark eyes, but mine, a reluctant blue, fixed on the purples, reds, and oranges that colored the vitie's once long and elegant wings. For the patag to function as desired, the wings are clipped and taped. For the first time I wondered why the vitie were chosen as the honored species to participate in the patag. Perhaps just because they were there.

The event began. The birds were pitted against each other, and little time was lost before deliberate attacks were made by both sides. It's not that the vities are naturally violent animals. Their nature is quite the opposite. Looking closely, I located the peculiar contrast evident between the creatures' fierce countenance and grace. Their muscles were tense from long periods of restriction; their bodies had lost their natural sense of ease. Violence now beat through their hearts. Being incarcerated in cages for so long before being released into a patag fight, the noble creatures emerge loyal only to freedom, yet uncertain of how to ensure it.

The vities' owners shared their birds' intensity. Fanatical and stormy commands, affirmations and disappointments alternately exploded from their mouths. I watched their large, taut stomachs rise and fall, flex and then exhale with sighs as these men jockeyed about the ring. There was a sense of paternalism, even one of compassion and concern that the owners revealed for their birds. Yet the function of the game took precedence over any feelings of sentiment. They were out to win.

I edged the toe of my shoe between the legs of two different youths and slid myself through and in front of them. I intended to close in on the scene further, but I suppose my eagerness showed. Before a muscle moved, my arm was grabbed. I looked over and met a pair of hard, complex eyes, warning me to notice and adhere to the black rope lying across the dirt in front of us—the boundary line.

This was a line drawn for us onlookers, but it was also meant to restrict the vities. Its black, thick form violently burnt the soil. So artificial and unnatural, yet I knew the rope had found a place of normalcy in the earth, having laid there for the turning of innumerable days and nights. Only the determination of will can remove such an enormous hallucination of permanency. None was evident that evening—only vehemence swirled over the rope and into the air as the birds, owners, and onlookers disturbed the turf. I muffled a cough.

“You coming home from work?” asked the woman with the complex eyes.

“Uh-huh,” I mumbled in response.

Her face held on to the infinite hours it had spent under the sun creating a beautifully rich bronze color, streaking it with a kaleidoscope of fine lines. She nodded her head once. I returned a question, “Do you live around here?”

She turned and pointed up a valley to the north. I had never imagined homes were nestled within those steep slopes of the island. “Moti Valley?” I asked.

“We farm piloku off the trees.” Piloku are the small African snails, imported by the colonial population as a delicacy, which now kill off much of the native vegetation, except for the native remuku trees in which they live. The snails continue to be a delicacy in town and are often exported as a luxury food. “It’s a good living,” she continued, “but our sons have left for the sea.”

She seemed saddened, so I offered, “The sea is not far from the valley. They still must come to visit often.”

“Yes, they do,” she said more optimistically. Smiling, she added, “They tell me that living with the sea brings them closer to our home in the valley.” She looked down at my shoes and asked, “Your mother, is she local? I think I know her, she’s a Matehu?”

Technically, both my parents were “local,” having been born and raised on the island, but I knew what she meant. “Yes, my grandparents are the Matehus,” I answered. “Are we related?”

“Everyone on this island has an auntie or cousin relating them to someone else.” She flashed me a momentary smile, which I returned. My identity was wrought with barriers. To this woman, however, they seemed to be mere features. I was only half “local,” living a reality of air conditioning and faxes, never having met “the cousin” who connected me, yet this woman made the connection. Our bodies stood inches apart, our minds existed a generation away. But how far was that generation in a circular space? The sea, the valley, the black boundary line—none occupied the places on my island that I had previously imagined.

“Get him!” The woman’s fist clenched the small pandanus pouch slung across the blue and green wrap tied over her chest.

“You have money on this fight?” I inquired.

“Always behind whichever is my brother’s bird,” she pointed to the ball of earth and feathers wrestling in the ring. From behind the black barrier we all watched the vities unleashing their venom on each other. I wanted to shout out to the birds, telling them to turn their violence on their owners—*they* were the enemy. I looked at the woman, enthusiastically encouraging her brother’s vitie to kill the other. The apathy that single

piece of rope created between us and those beautiful animals, our own indigenous treasures, was overpoweringly ironic.

My eyes turned upward. I saw the mountain that rose out of the water. I saw the first woman of mud. I became strangely aware of the ocean waves lapping the shores of my island, miles away. My nostrils filled with the smell of fresh blood. The violence was taking place. Somehow, sometimes, to free ourselves, we massacre each other. Other times we make connections and adapt. The routes are endless, leading us to new routes, or else, to dead-ends. To know a landscape is to know how to navigate its many pathways. This woman knew many routes lost to me, and I, new ones unknown to her.

I was at a locality that I didn't usually visit, lending a strange flavor to the rising moon. The evening had no destiny, remaining open to any outcry, or to passivity. On such nights all one can do is follow one's instincts, so I carefully slipped out of my shoes and left them empty where I had stood beside the rope. I continued down the muddy road, aware of the cheers and continuing violence behind me. But I was now more involved with the softness of my own footsteps. I walked away never knowing which bird had won the patag. It didn't matter—that wasn't the fight I was waiting for.

In "An Oceanic Nation," I create a fictitious island that reflects what I feel is a "mixed state" of identity and landscape (or seascape) across Oceania today. Our contemporary realities are multi-sited, and they are situated above, below, and within the demon of (neo)colonialism that lingers in Oceania. In this story, the vitie bird symbolizes native pride and national autonomy, which has arguably been turned into a source of entertainment and economic opportunity. The narrator represents the younger, (half) native generation who are divided between their modern identity and a lack of knowledge about their indigenous heritage; the elder woman represents those who possess this indigenous knowledge, but who nevertheless participate in its destruction and continued incarceration (as revealed in the bird fight). In the end, the young woman realizes that pitting indigenous against indigenous is the wrong struggle, and she discovers that she has much to learn about how they are all connected and empowered as an Oceanic group.

This short story arose as my response to the article, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" by Clifford Geertz, which appeared in Interpretive Social Science: A

Second Look, edited by Paul Rabinow and William M Sullivan (1979), while I was also reading Frantz Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth (1963). The result is this short story, in which I explore the idea that while (neo)colonization has had many negative effects on Oceania, it has also created new opportunities for re-creation. The challenge is to seek out and create them for ourselves.

My name is KARIN NA`AUALI`I ELEANOR TSUK-LING INGERSOLL and I was born on O`ahu. I attended Punahou Academy, Brown University in Rhode Island, and received a master's degree in international relations in the Political Science Department of the University of Hawai`i at Mānoa. My current research as a doctoral candidate in the Indigenous Politics Program articulates a seascape epistemology, an indigenous methodology that presumes a knowledge of the sea: the birds, colors of the clouds, shapes of the currents, limu, fish, ocean swells, and star patterns. This knowledge tells Kānaka Maoli how to move through the sea, as well as through life within a neocolonial-dominant world. My current goal is to truly understand this notion of seascape and offer it as a decolonizing epistemology for Kānaka.