TAU AVE I LE MITA’I, TAU AVE I LE MAMAO: MAPPING THE TATAU-ED
BODY IN THE SAMOAN DIASPORA

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Any errors in this thesis are my own.
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Chapter I: Introduction

The title of my thesis “Tau ave i le Mitai, Tau ave i le Mamao: Mapping the Tatau-ed Body in the Samoan Diaspora” is an attempt to articulate how diasporic Samoans express their cultural identity engaging specific performative notions such as the traditional art form of ta tatau. As a diasporic Samoan, I have always been intrigued with the various ways diasporic Samoans are able to express pride or mitamitaga in their cultural identity. I am also particularly aware of how Samoan-ness is translated or interpreted by other individuals and communities across America’s diverse landscape. In this thesis, I explore the traditional Samoan art form of ta tatau and how it has evolved over time and space to become iconic of diasporic Samoan identity throughout the United States.

As the methodology in this thesis is primarily textual, one possible limitation with my thesis is the fact that I do not conduct formal interviews or surveys with individuals I write about. However, in keeping with a methodology that is deemed culturally appropriate, I conducted casual conversations with a significant number of individuals who are very knowledgeable on the subject of tatau-ed bodies within the Samoan diaspora. Some of these people included family members, faculty members of the University of Hawai‘i and individuals who are a part of an intricate network of Samoan diasporic communities throughout Hawai‘i and California. Through these casual conversations...

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1 The Samoan orthography developed by the early missionaries utilizes the English letters a, e, i, o, and u for the five vowels sounds and a macron over the vowel to show phonemic length. The consonants are represented by the English letters f, g, h, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, and the apostrophe (for the glottal stop). Since modern Samoan writing does not show long vowel marking or the glottal stop, I have chosen to follow Samoan convention and not use them in this thesis. The only exceptions are in cited references or instances of requests by informants to use these markings in their quotes or their proper names.
interviews, I was able to better contextualize the abundance of textual sources I found pertaining to the varied sites of identity I have chosen to reflect on.

In my second chapter, I use the first person narrative and have chosen to call it “One Samoan’s Reflections on Tracing the Mark.” In this personal narrative, I explain my own fascination in exploring the traditional Samoan art form of ta tatau as a medium or site of identity. In an attempt to explain my fascination with the tatau-ed body, I also describe the various meanings or subtexts associated with the body bearing this distinctive Samoan mark.

In the third chapter, “Imag(ining) the Tatau-ed Body” I examine the various ways tatau-ed bodies are interpreted and imagined by outsiders. In my thesis, I draw a distinct difference between “outsiders” whom I identify as non-Samoans and of course, “insiders” who are primarily Samoans. “Outsiders” are academics, visual artists or writers who have reflected a great deal on Samoans and of course the traditional art form of ta tatau. In this particular chapter, I argue that a National Geographic magazine image of a Samoan man’s tatau-ed body is culturally inappropriate. I also analyze and discuss the implications of an entirely separate project which could be deemed as a site of identity for diasporic Samoans in the United States. This project, “Worn with Pride” was a successful museum exhibit which was primarily constructed by another “outsider” on the Samoan artistic heritage within the diasporic Samoan community of Oceanside, California.

In the fourth chapter, I provide case studies of the how the tatau-ed body is exhibited within American popular culture as I examine the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E, a Samoan rap group out of Carson, California and Samoan actor and professional wrestler,
Dwayne Johnson, aka The Rock. In both case studies, I seek to show how the tradition of ta tatau has changed and evolved with these younger Samoans who were born and raised in the United States. One recurring thread with each of these case studies is how the choice of tatau for these Samoans is indicative of the pride they have for the faasamoa. I also wish to emphasize how they use the tradition of ta tatau as a visible marker of their Samoan-ness within their respective careers.

My fifth and final chapter, "E O Au o le Samoa, Ou te le Ma e Tau Atu"² is based on a popular song which was recorded by artist Aggie Sua Hewson in 1998. As my concluding chapter, I stress the importance of acknowledging the complexity of Samoan diasporic identity as traditional art forms such as ta tatau change and evolve with younger generations of Samoans over time and space.

² I am a Samoan and am not ashamed to proclaim this!
Chapter II: One Samoan's Reflections on Tracing the Mark

“Sense of history is akin to what environmental psychologists describe as sense of place—not quite territoriality, as among other animals, but a sense of locatedness and belonging. Sensing history, we explore fundamental questions concerning personal and group identity and our relationship to the environment. A sense of history locates us in space, with knowledge that helps us gain a sense of where we are, helping us to understand. . . . A sense of history locates us in time, with knowledge that helps us gain a sense of when we are, filling in gaps in our personal recollection and family stories that allow us to understand our place in succession of past and future generations.”

David Glassberg

After I graduated from Samoa College, a government high school in Apia, the capital city of independent Samoa\(^2\) in 1990, I decided to pursue a university education in the United States. To help ease my transition in a new country and culture, my parents felt it would be advantageous to move the entire family from Samoa to Hawai‘i. A staunch advocate for education, my father determined it was time to allow each of his five children easier access to better educational and employment opportunities. Yet, even after we moved to Hawai‘i, my parents continued to travel back and forth to Apia, Auckland, Los Angeles and San Diego. As title-holders or matai\(^3\) within their respective families, both my parents were expected to participate, serve and contribute toward family faalavelave\(^4\).

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1 David Glassberg, Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).
2 Formerly known as Western Samoa until 1997.
3 Matai is an individual bestowed with a chiefly title within one’s family or village.
4 Literally translates as complications—could range from a wedding, funeral, title investiture, church dedication, or traditional Samoan court case over land or a matai title.
After one of my mother’s frequent trips back to Apia, she surprised us one day with a malu—the traditional woman’s tatau ⁵ covering her thighs and down to her knees. As I observed my mother tend to the raw welts and bruises across her legs, I became intrigued with the various motifs that were permanently inscribed upon her body. I think it was at this moment that I became interested in the traditional Samoan art-form of ta tatau and how diasporic Samoans like my mother actively sought ways to perpetuate it.

Not long after my mother had received her malu, I heard of other Samoans seeking tufuga ta tatau ⁶ from Samoa to Los Angeles and New Zealand to perform tatau on Samoans across diasporic spaces. It was not uncommon to hear of Samoans flocking to garages or houses in Waipahu, Hawai‘i or Carson, California where tufuga ta tatau were hosted by diasporic Samoans who were eager to bear the mark of the tatau.

I suspect that the malu for my mother was a personal statement. Her father is a matai or the sao ⁷ of his own family who holds the title “Leniu” from the village of Laulii ⁸. As the sao, my maternal grandfather would probably assert that one must not read too much into why women received the malu. For him and his forefathers, the malu was a way to distinguish who the sao’s daughter was—the malu then is a distinctive marker of identity—a privilege accorded to distinguish the status and rank of one’s matai title.

However, I came to think about other meanings the malu might have for my mother. Could the malu be interpreted as a symbolic link my mother desired to have as a Samoan who was living beyond the familiar shores of Samoa? Why was it important for

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⁵ Tatau is the Samoan word for tattoo.
⁶ Guild of artisans or cultural practitioners who perform the art of ta tatau.
⁷ While there are two types of matai in the faasamoa, i.e. the ali‘i and the tulafale, the sao is the ali‘i with the highest ranking or status within a Samoan family, village and sometimes a district. This is an important distinction within the hierarchy of matai.
⁸ Laulii is a village within the Vaimauga district on the island of Upolu in Samoa.
her to receive the malu? In numerous conversations, my mother insists that getting her malu was a “spiritual” journey for her. But why had she waited until her 40s to bear the mark of the malu; why was it critical to receive her malu while in the diaspora—away from Samoa?

Figure 1: A Samoan woman featured with the malu

My mother insists the timing could not have been more ideal when she finally did receive her malu. For years she had been contemplating getting a malu and was mentally and emotionally prepared to endure the physical pain during and after the process of receiving the tatau. I am convinced that my mother’s decision to bear the mark of the tatau or the malu could be interpreted as an attempt to identify, merge or fuse the multiple realms she moves in and out of as a daughter, woman, wife, mother, matai, and in particular an emigrant or transnational with multiple allegiances. Her desire to receive a tatau would also be attributed to her need to have a permanent reminder of her Samoan identity as she is surrounded by a plethora of cultures and ethnicities in Hawaii. Indeed,
recent trends in Hawaii, California and New Zealand show a resurgence of traditional Samoan tattooing amongst Samoans like her that live within the diaspora.

Samoan Diaspora: Tau ave I le Mitai, Tau ave I le Mamao

In the thick of writing this thesis, I was faced with the challenge of finding an appropriate title that would capture the essence of what I was struggling to describe. As a Samoan, I was intrigued by the various ways tatau was represented amongst other Samoans in the diaspora. For cultural critic and theorist Avtar Brah, diasporas are articulated as “places of long-term, if not permanent, community formations.” Since the 1950s, the emergence of Samoan communities beyond the shores of Samoa has been impressive.

In a mesmerizing photographic book *The Samoans: A Global Family*, photographer Frederic Koehler Sutter acknowledges that “given the incredibly strong ties of the extended family, it was not long before Samoan communities sprang up in Hawaii, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Auckland.” From their communal villages in Samoa, Samoans have actively sought to join other aiga or kin in these foreign cities or locales.

Another important feature Brah associates with diasporic communities is the fact that they can operate as “sites of hope and new beginnings [where] individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure.” The Samoan archipelago consists of two political nation states. The first being American Samoa, which is an unincorporated territory of the United States, and the second being the Independent State of Samoa. Samoans in both places share the same culture and history and ascribe to a particular

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11 Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. P 193
ideology or culture that is referred to as the faasamo. Like other nation states within the Pacific region or Oceania, Samoans have also had numerous encounters with Western colonialism—inevitably leading to mass movements of migration from either American Samoa or Independent Samoa and into countries such as New Zealand, Australia and the United States.

After deciding upon the title “tau ave I le mitai, tau ave I le mamao,” it became clear to me that I was seeking to understand how Samoans in the diaspora could still identify with notions that were still very Samoan. The loose translation of my title implies that as Samoans travel across diasporic spaces over time, they never lose sense of where they come from. In this thesis, I contend that the tradition of ta tatau is a distinctive identity for Samoans throughout the diaspora—an extensive network of geographic sites ranging from the United Kingdom and Germany in Europe, to Canada, the United States in the Americas, and stretching across vast tracts of our beloved Oceania with nation states such as New Zealand, Australia, Fiji and Hawaii. As generations of Samoans choose to bear the mark of the tatau in the diaspora, they carry with them an enormous sense of pride or mitamitaga.

Mitamitaga through the public display of tatau has become quite apparent as Samoans based in Hawaii and California actively seek to recruit tufuga ta tatau from Samoa. When Samoans in Hawaii and California host tufuga ta tatau from Samoa, these tufuga charge diasporic Samoans up to thousands of dollars for one tatau which raises a number of questions for Samoans who are concerned with keeping traditions such as ta tatau intact. Micah van der Ryn, a visual anthropologist who produced “Tatau What One

12 In the manner of all things Samoan.
Must Do offers an interesting perspective on Samoans in California who seek to bear the mark of the tatau. As the film spotlights diasporic Samoans who seek to bear the mark of the tatau and the various motivations they have for wanting a tatau, it is impossible to overlook the fact that some of these Samoans have very little understanding of the historical and cultural significance of the tatau that they wish to bear. This has inevitably caused some degree of concern among more knowledgeable and traditional Samoans who feel the sacred tradition of ta tatau has been compromised.

Figure 2: Jerrod Talavou Avegalio, a young Samoan receiving his tatau.

13 Micah Van der Ryn, Pacific Islanders in Communications. and Flying Fox Films., Tatau What One Must Do, videorecording ; Distributed by Pacific Islanders in Communications., Honolulu, Hawai'i, 1997.
For cultural purists, a category I am most likely to associate with Samoans\textsuperscript{14}, the tradition of ta tatau is in peril as tufuga ta tatau are thought to be less discriminating as to who can bear the mark of the tatau. It is thought that tufuga ta tatau are more prone to exploit the tradition of ta tatau for commercial and personal gain rather than to perpetuate its meaning as an important historical and cultural form of art within the diaspora. The central issue that seems to worry some Samoans then is the notion that as tatau becomes increasingly desirable by diasporic Samoans who may not possess the knowledge pertaining to certain traditions within the faasamoa,\textsuperscript{15} the tatau is further denigrated—causing it to be meaningless.

As diasporic Samoans actively seek to bear the mark of the tatau, there is the inherent assumption that Samoan-ness is not indicative of the geographical boundaries or physical connectedness one must have to a specific place like Samoa. My father, for instance, is of a generation of Samoans who believes the mark of the tatau is an indication that one ascribes to living the culture in every possible aspect and way. The faasamoa, for someone like my father, is a “living” culture that one cannot learn through books or films; in essence, the faasamoa is carried out through tautua\textsuperscript{16} regardless of where one may live. Therefore, Samoans who choose to live within the diaspora are not bound by geographical boundaries that may determine whether one can live the faasamoa. On the other hand, cultural purists or practitioners who insist that the faasamoa can only be lived a certain way may contend that the ability to engage in tautua within a Samoan conceptual framework is virtually impossible while being in the diaspora and far removed from the autochthonous “indigeneity” of the faasamoa in Samoa.

\textsuperscript{14}Cultural purists as far as the faasamoa is concerned are more likely to be Samoans versus non-Samoans.
\textsuperscript{15}In the manner of things that are Samoan.
\textsuperscript{16}Service rendered by a Samoan for his family, village or district.
My father asserts that tautua is exercised when one reciprocates his respective families through tautua regardless of where he may live. The notion of tautua is particularly important for Samoans because individual identity is derived from continual interaction with the family and the community. An individual’s identity is defined by the specific activities and roles performed within varied social or familial circles. Thus, tautua can continue outside of Samoa, whether it takes place within local family affairs, church activities, or by sending remittances back to Samoa. Each act of service provides an additional facet to an individual’s identity as defined by family and social units.

Tautua through the mark of the tatau embodies a symbol tracing one facet of a diasporic Samoan’s identity. As the mark of the tatau—whether it be within or outside of the ethnic Samoan community—distinguishes a Samoan as being Samoan, the mark of the tatau also serves to satisfy a need to belong and be accepted as an “insider.” Beyond the ethnic Samoan community, it signals that the bearer is ethnically unique and is a member of a distinct cultural subgroup within a large multicultural society.

For New Zealand born Samoan Sean Mallon, who is charged as a curator with the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, “[T]atau can bear a wide range of meanings. The markings can symbolize the exotic, but also the familiar. They can be images that can isolate and ostracise people, but also connect and bring them together. Tatau can be an affirmation of a person’s sense of place.” If the mark of the tatau is considered as a performative expression or notion of cultural identity, then Mallon’s assumption that tatau “can be an affirmation of a person’s sense of place” is particularly insightful. Yet, while many diasporic Samoans may view the tatau as an adornment or

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badge that offers them membership within their own ethnic group, more traditional Samoans, especially those in Samoa, may have a different view of the tatau. Samoans in Samoa would contend that diasporic Samoans have altered or reconfigured aspects of a specific tradition that bears little resemblance to how it has traditionally been rendered or represented in Samoa.

**Tatau as Adornment**

As a teenager growing up in Samoa, my family lived near the Vaisigano River\(^\text{18}\)—a place where people from my village of Apia (and other neighboring villages) often congregated to swim, bathe, launder clothes and occasionally wash cars. On a particular muggy afternoon, my grandfather who had been visiting us from Auckland, New Zealand decided to join my sister and me for a dip. As we were getting up to leave the river, however, my grandfather’s lavalava\(^\text{19}\) had slipped from his waist. Everyone around us had taken notice and my sister and I were slightly embarrassed as other teenagers and children burst out in laughter. Unfazed by their giggling, my grandfather shrugged his shoulders and looked at them sternly saying: “Tou te talie i Ie a? O le tatau o le laei o Samoa.” In other words, the tatau on my body is my clothing—the apparel of all Samoans: so why do you laugh and mock me?

As I have struggled to conceptualize and write this thesis, my grandfather’s observation of his own tatau has often intrigued me. In the temporal sense, the mark of the tatau ultimately transcends as a form of clothing—suggesting that there is no need to

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\(^\text{18}\) Sometimes referred to as Loto Samasoni in neighboring areas of Malua Fou or Malifa—but more commonly referred to as Vaisigano River that runs through the national and historic landmark, Aggie Grey’s Hotel.

\(^\text{19}\) A garment, pareu or sarong
clothe the nakedness of a tatau-ed body. Writer and cultural critic Albert Wendt substantiates this notion as he distinguishes between between precolonial and colonial conceptions of nakedness and clothing. For clarification, “precolonial” in this frame of reference denotes an era in Samoa before Samoans had contact with westerners or papalagi. “Colonial” on the other hand refers to an historical era where Samoans were colonized by the Germans, British and New Zealanders. After Western Samoa became independent from New Zealand in 1962, Samoans were considered a “postcolonial” country or people.

Being clothed (lavalava) had little to do with clothes or laei. In prepapalagi times, to wear nothing above the navel was not considered “nakedness.” To “clothe” one’s arse and genitals was enough. In many Pacific cultures, body decoration and adornment is considered clothing. We have to be careful about those terms though because much of what has been considered “decoration” or “adornment” by outsiders has to do with identity (individual-aiga-group), status, age, religious beliefs, relationships to other art forms and the community and not to do with prettying yourself.20

While Wendt identifies a distinctive discrepancy between papalagi and indigenous perceptions of “decoration” and “adornment,” the same discrepancy in the understanding of tatau also exists amongst Samoans themselves. In July 2004, the branch of my extended family (at least those of us who are based here on 'Oahu), collectively known as Aiga Sa Fonoti, were hosting a highly anticipated family reunion.21 Over a period of two years, we had been collaboratively working to organize this reunion and in

21 Incidentally, other members of the Aiga Sa Fonoti who came to the reunion in July 2004 flew in from Maine, Colorado, Utah, Texas Washington, California, Sydney, Auckland, Wellington and Denmark. The first reunion for the Aiga Sa Fonoti was held in 2002 and was hosted by our family branch based in Auckland.
order to raise much needed funds, we decided to participate in “Samoa mo Samoa,” an annual community event organized by a number of Samoans in the community.

To encourage community involvement, any group that participated in the festivities pledged a monetary gift of anywhere from $500 to $1000. Determined to best represent the Aiga Sa Fonoti at this event, our family diligently rehearsed traditional Samoan dance items and songs\(^{22}\) to be showcased on a designated night at Ke’ehi Park Lagoon. Yet, on the night of our performance, conflict arose amongst members of my family. With any Samoan traditional performance involving music and dance it is customary to end the performance with a taualuga\(^{23}\). My father, who holds the matai title of “Fonoti” (from the village of Faleapuna within the district of Vaa o Fonoti in Samoa) is the sao, and so it was expected that one of his two daughters perform the taualuga as the taupou.\(^{24}\) Much to some family members’ dismay, however, my father at the very last minute designated his youngest son to perform the taualuga instead as a manaia\(^{25}\) without the tuiga.\(^{26}\) The family members who were upset had anticipated that my father would choose one of his daughters and in doing so they would have her wear the tuiga. But my father was adamant that a tuiga would not be worn at all; in fact, my father insisted that “Samoa mo Samoa” was not an occasion where the tuiga was to be worn by anyone within our family. From his perspective, only certain traditional Samoan events such as a

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22 We held practices for several months at various local parks and individual family members homes for hours on end. The range in age of our group was 2-72 and on average with the bulk of the group being under the age of 18.

23 A solo dance traditionally performed by the daughter or son of the sao.

24 A titled village maiden who is often the daughter of a matai.

25 The sao’s son—usually the titled leader of the aumaga or untitled men within a Samoan village.

26 Ceremonial headdress usually worn by the taupou or manaia to commemorate a very special occasion in the faasamoa.
taalolo\textsuperscript{27} or an ava faatupu\textsuperscript{28} warranted the use of a tuiga—a marker or icon that was used only on very rare occasions. In the end, my brother, the manaia, wore a pale fuiono\textsuperscript{29} and those who had wanted to use the tuiga were more or less resigned to accept my father’s decision as the sao.

The tuiga, an icon within the faasamoa, is what Samoans would identify as a measina. These consist of any material item, symbol, or body of knowledge esteemed as honorific or essential to the community or the culture. Similarly, the traditional art-form of ta tatau could also be categorized as measina. But when is it appropriate to adorn oneself with measina? What factors would affect one’s decision to bear the mark of the tatau?

\textsuperscript{27} An official presentation of gifts with the highest decorum.
\textsuperscript{28} A kava ceremony for official dignitaries.
\textsuperscript{29} Headpiece for either a male or female—has much less significance than the tuiga.
An old Samoan adage my father often cites upon referring to tatau-ed individuals is: “E mua ai ta le gutu, ta ai le tino.” In essence, this saying insinuates that before one pursues the mark of the tatau, he must first understand and comprehend the oratory/language and traditions involved pertaining to his family, matai, village(s) and district. In other words, “E muamua aoao le tautala I le gutu,” meaning he must first learn how to speak. Therefore, the tatau is deemed incongruent if someone desires to receive the tatau without having attempted to seriously learn and acquaint himself with the necessary protocol within his family, village, and district.
For Samoan males in precolonial Samoa, the bearing of the tatau warranted the type of respect and honor commonly attributed in Europe to battle proven medieval knights or scarred German fencers. Imagine the tufuga ta tatau hammering the fine-toothed comb into your skin and then covering sensitive body parts as immense pain courses through your being. In essence, the ability of a taulealea\textsuperscript{30} to withstand the immense physical torture under the au garnered a tremendous amount of respect.\textsuperscript{31} In precolonial and definitely postcolonial Samoa, individuals who are able to withstand the au are considered to undergo both a spiritual and physical metamorphosis: to suggest that the taulealea has initiated a rite of passage into adulthood. While the tatau is often considered a rite reserved for males, as in my mother’s case, females can also be tattooed for similar reasons.

Albert Wendt addresses the significance of the malu, the tatau designed specifically for women. According to Wendt,

\begin{quote}
[\textbf{T}he malu was essential wear for women before they married. Clothed not to cover your nakedness but to show that you are ready for life, for adulthood and service to your community, that you triumphed over physical pain and are now ready to face the demands of life, and ultimately to master the most demanding of activities—language/oratory.]\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

But enduring the pain should not be considered the sole prerequisite for bearing the mark of the tatau. As in all things Samoan there is a duality of purpose and being. In fact, Bradd Shore provides a thorough elaboration on this aspect of the duality of the

\textsuperscript{30} Untitled young man—but once he bears the mark of the tatau he is also referred to as a sogaimiti. The taulealea who does not bear the mark of the tatau is referred to as a pulau.

\textsuperscript{31} The au is the traditional implement used for tatau—receiving a tatau under the au is symbolic of the wearer’s commitment to faasamoa. An au is usually a small fine toothed-comb made of boar’s tusk.

\textsuperscript{32} Wendt, "Afterword: Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body," 400.
faasamoa. Individuals may undergo the process of the tatau not only to demonstrate
their ability and willingness to serve the family regardless of personal pain that may be
encountered. In fact, there is also a deep sense of personal pride—mitamitaga to be
derived from having and showing the tatau. For Samoan architectural theorist, Albert
Refiti, the concept of duality within the faasamoa is “a quality that is often written out of
its history . . . powerful entities which have the capacity to exist in both worlds.” Refiti’s hypothesis on duality seems appropriate as one tries to determine the actual
reasoning individuals may seek to be tatau-ed.

Alfred Gell, a noted authority on tattooing in Polynesia, provides additional
Gell further states, “It is on this paradox, that power comes from service, honour from
submission . . . it seems to me that this puzzling duality of elevation and subjection is
precisely what motivates the political significance of tattooing in the Samoan context.”
For that matter, both Refiti and Gell are essentially suggesting that there is a certain
complexity behind peoples reasoning to bear the mark of the tatau. From one
perspective, it can be attributed to service embodied through one’s tautua—commitment
to one’s family, village and district. From yet another perspective, it can also be
attributed to the honor and dignity that is accorded to individuals by the rest of their
community as their bodies reflect the mark of the tatau. In fact, Refiti offers additional
insight on this communal claim as he states,

In an ironic way, tattooing in traditional Pacific societies was a public act,
not the mark of individuation, as is the case with the majority of tattooing

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34 Albert Refiti, Siamese Twins, Forked Columns and Tattooing in Samoa, 2001, Available:
today. So marking and writing on a person’s body makes the individual public property: the marks of the tattoo expose the inside to the outside, making one’s soul visible to the community. Instead of the soul being kept hidden inside as a private act in the Western world, the soul is worn as armour on the outside in the Pacific.36

In accepting Refiti’s claim that the armour of one’s tatau allows a community to see the inside of a person’s soul, we can also determine other possible motivations diasporic Samoans in the United States may have for marking their bodies with tatau.

At a graduate student conference in May 2004, Charlie Skull presented a paper entitled “By being better Samoans you are also becoming better Americans”37 reiterating the concept of faasinomaga38. Skull notes how faasinomaga is described as “that which is being pointed at or shown” and is contextualized to refer to a specific identity for Samoans who live within the diaspora39. Could we assert that as diasporic Samoans in the United States bear the mark of the tatau that they are not only becoming more Samoan, but also better Americans?

In this thesis, as I illustrate the historical significance of ta tatau, I also seek to assess why this particular tradition has been perpetuated amongst Samoan communities throughout the United States—in spite of their geographic distance from Samoa. While Samoans increasingly find favor with the mark of the tatau across these diasporic spaces, new interpretations or meanings are now being infused into the “old” tradition of ta tatau. Furthermore, traditional notions previously associated with tatau prior to

36 Refiti, Siamese Twins, Forked Columns and Tattooing in Samoa.
38 Scull attributes this concept to Samoan scholar Aiono Dr Fanaafi Le Tagaloa Pita, formerly of the National University of Samoa in Apia.
precolonial or precontact Samoa now provide an interesting contrast with tatau in the postcolonial, global capitalist context. As Samoans strive to create and inhabit diasporic spaces across the American landscape, the tatau seems to have become an icon of their cultural identity.
Chapter III: Imagin(ing) the Tatau from the Periphery

"Thinking historically is a process of locating oneself in space and time."
James Clifford

1 James Clifford, Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (London: Harvard University Press, 1997).

2 Rochelle Fonoti, unpublished poem
In 2001, the *National Geographic* featured an extraordinary exhibit on its website showcasing the various traditional art forms of body tattooing and piercing throughout the world. Culturally diverse images from geographically remote areas such as Brazil, Japan, New Zealand and Ethiopia were featured alongside a provocative nude photograph.
entitled "Man at Sunset, Samoa." In the caption, Chris Rainier, writer and photographer of this unique collection of photography, states:

Samoa is considered the epicenter of tribal tattooing in the South Pacific. Unlike the rest of Polynesia, traditional tattooing never died there. Considered an integral part of initiation into Samoan culture mainly for men, but also for women, the markings are made at puberty. The men’s tattoos often depict the traditional Samoan canoe.

On a website which markets much of his work, photojournalist Rainier is cited as being "one of the leading documentary photographers" committed to "document the disappearing cultures and tribes remaining on the planet." While Rainier’s commitment and dedication to documenting indigenous cultures is evident with the various images that are accessible online, questions about the stigma or stereotypical meaning associated with Rainier’s images depicted in a publication like the National Geographic cannot be overlooked.

As a Samoan and an academic, I am prompted to question the premise of Rainier’s image of the sogaimiti. First and foremost, Rainier is not a Samoan and his image of the tatau-ed sogaimiti is disturbing. After writing the poem, "Tribal Warrior" I had concluded that the nudity was culturally inappropriate and Rainier could never be privy to this information because he was not Samoan. Rainier’s nude image reinforces a distinctive “difference” between the American consumer and the native other. In Reading National Geographic, a book offering an in-depth analysis of the magazine, anthropologist Catherine A. Lutz and sociologist Jane L. Collins assert that photographic

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4 Rainier, Man at Sunset, Samoa.
images such as Rainier’s are intended to juxtapose an American ideology of the third world that is highly exoticized.  

Lutz and Collins add,

They are viewed by readers with diverse preoccupations, who understand and interpret the pictures in a variety of ways. Some readings reinforce American illusions of cultural superiority and paternalism, while others entail and engagement with the subject photographed, an identification across cultural boundaries, the awakening of a curiosity that may be politically invigorating.

Likewise, in Staging Tourism Jane C. Desmond asserts that “cultural difference is represented by and understandable through direct observation of ‘specimens.’ It is coupled with a conceptual system which maps species, people and races into typologies based on bodily difference. . . .” For Lutz and Collins, the National Geographic is an institution of learning that essentially sets out to establish “harmful ways of viewing differences.” Therefore, photographs that are often featured within the pages of National Geographic appear as “cultural artifacts” with the intention of educating the American public about the exoticized “other.” Lutz and Collins further add, “The development of the National Geographic Society can rightly be told as a success story. Its magazine has found a powerful place in American society as purveyor of the facts worth knowing about the world. . . it presents an idealized and exotic world relatively free of pain or class conflict, a world stumbling or marching on the path to modernity.”

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7 Lutz and Collins, Reading National Geographic.
8 Jane Desmond, Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
9 Lutz and Collins, Reading National Geographic.
10 Lutz and Collins, Reading National Geographic.
As the sogaimiti poses against the backdrop of a picturesque sunset, the typical American viewer is instantly aware of the cultural difference as he is transported back in time across the vast expanse of horizon. As his muscular arms are outstretched, the viewer may get the distinct impression that there is conflict amidst this tranquil serenity. The clouds across the horizon are foreshadowed amidst a calm ocean and the tide is low as if to suggest that something drastic or unexpected is yet to happen. But even so, the sogaimiti appears to be gazing toward the ocean—his weight firmly anchored upon fragmented volcanic rock—suggesting nothing has threatened the harmonious balance of nature in this idyll paradise.

In this context, Rainier's image of the tatau-ed Samoan man is evocative enough to recall or create differences; hence, the body transcends as a venue or site of reaffirming, contesting or negotiating identity. The body emerges as a canvas whereby Samoans—both in Samoa and the diaspora—are able to articulate the various notions associated with the traditional art-form of ta tatau. Albert Wendt reiterates this connection between the body and tatau the traditional artform of ta tatau as he alludes to expressions of tatau as "defiant texts/scripts of nationalism and identity."

Alfred Gell raises a thought provoking question as he speculates why the tatau-ed body would appeal more to the gaze than the body that has not been marked at all. Gell insists,

Marked, patterned, or scarred skin draws in the gaze of the onlooker, exercises the power of fascination, and lowers certain defenses. The eye isolates and follows the mazy pathways of the design and eventually, so to speak, enters the body of the other, because the peculiarity of tattooing is that it is inside the skin rather than on its surface.

12 Gell, Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia.
Gell's assessment of the gaze with relation to the tatau-ed body reaffirms Desmond's argument that observation is very much influenced by people's notions of cultural difference.

Wes Black, an authority on the social implications of tattooing asserts in a recent article that tattoos "incarnate a sense of place, community, and history on the skin of the individual . . . like a bearing from which orientations to life are taken as the person moves physically through different localities and overtime."\(^{13}\) For diasporic Samoans who choose to bear the mark of the tatau, Black's analysis of tattooing is accurate. As Samoans seek to create and replicate the internetworking of the "global family," the tatau then becomes a visible marker of identity. Assessing Samoan cultural identity through specific patterns or circuits of movement or travel within the diaspora, allows one to gauge the implications of the tradition of ta tatau across an American landscape.

**Origins of Tatau**

In order to trace the origins of ta tatau, Samoans, like other Pacific Islander peoples must revert to folklore and mythology. Noel McGrevy, an authority on ta tatau documents various versions of this legend in his pioneering thesis on Samoan tatau.\(^{14}\) The traditional legend most commonly cited is that of Taema and Tilafaiga, Siamese twin sisters who swam from Samoa to Fiji. When they departed Fiji for Samoa, Taema and Tilafaiga were given tattooing instruments and specific instructions by Fijians Tufou and Filelei on the art of tattooing. After Tufou and Filelei had bid the sisters to tattoo the

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\(^{14}\) Noel Lawrence McGrevy, *O Le Tatatau: An Examination of Certain Aspects of Samoan Tattooing to the Present*, Theses for the Degree of Master of Arts (University of Hawaii at Manoa; No. 1063 ([Honolulu]: 1973).
women, they chanted their instructions so as not to forget what they were told. But on
their way back to Samoa, the sisters were distracted by a magnificent seashell and
stopped to retrieve it causing them to reverse the instructions. As a result, the men were
tattooed instead of the women. The lyrics of the traditional Samoan song “Pese o le
Tatau” recount the inevitable mishap of Taema and Tilafaiga:

O le mafuaga lenei na iloa
O le taga o le tatau I Samoa
O le malaga a teine e toalua
Na feausi mai I Fiti I le vasaloloa
This is the origin we know
Of the tattooing of the tatau in Samoa
A journey by two women
Who swam from Fiji across the ocean

Na la aumai ai o le ato au
Ma si a la pese e tutumau
Fai mai e tata o fafine
Ae le tata o tane
They brought the tattooing kit
And their unchanging song
That said women were to be tattooed
And not men

Ae o le ala na tata ai o tane
Ina ua sese si a la pese
Taunuuu I gatai o Falealupo
Ua vaaiia loa o le faisua ua tele
But the reason why men are tattooed
Is because their song went wrong
Reaching outside Falealupo
They saw a giant clam

Tolofa I si tama ua taatia
O le tufuga lea ua amatalia
Tolofa ua tagi aueue
Ua otiotio solo le au ta puletele
The women dived
And changed their song
To say men were to be tattooed
And not women

Sole sole, ia loto tele
O le taaloga a tama tane
E ui lava ina tiga tele
Ae mulimuli aue ua e fefete
Sole, sole, be brave
This is the sport of male heirs
Despite the enormous pain
Afterwards you will swell with pride

O atu motu uma o le Pasefika
Ua sili Samoa le tautaua
O le sogaimiti ua savalivali mai
Ua fepalafi mai ana faaia
Of all the countries of the Pacific
Samoa is the most famous
The sogaimiti walking towards you
With his faaila glistening

Aso faaifo, faamulialiao
Curved lines, motif like ali
The legend of Taema and Tilafaiga which explains the origins of tatau is also indicative of the contact Samoans maintained with their neighboring Tongans and Fijians. As Samoans, Tongans, and Fijians sought ways to establish ties with each other, the challenge of negotiating their differences for power would have been inevitable. Another narrative that reinforces the Samoan-Fijian connection is that of Apaula, a Fijian woman who was married to a Samoan chief named Vaea. I cite this particular narrative to show the continuity of travel or movement in Samoa and how narratives are used by Samoans to strengthen ties or nurture relationships with family and kin.

A classic example of how narratives are used to strengthen ties amongst Samoans can be found with African American-Samoan wrestler and actor Dwayne Johnson when he visited Samoa in 2004. One particular gift he received was an extraordinary wood carving of Vaea and Apaula by Samoan artist Penehuro Papalii. The story goes that shortly after giving birth to a son, Apaula’s dying father had sent her seven brothers to ask her to return to Fiji. But not long after that, Apaula discovers that her brothers have deceived her after they eat her son.

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15 His mother Feagaimaleata Maivia Johnson was born in Lalomanu, Aleipata of Samoa and is the daughter of Ofelia and Fanene Peter Maivia. Dwayne Johnson is therefore the grandson of legendary wrestler Peter Maivia and often acknowledges his close relationship with him before he passed away in 198_. During August 2004, Dwayne and his mother Ata Johnson made a much publicized trip to Samoa where he was conferred the title “Seiuli” by Samoa’s Head of State Malietoa Tanumafili II. It is rumored that Johnson’s biological grandfather is a member of the Malietoa family which is why Tanumafili may have considered it appropriate or fitting to confer the title upon Johnson while he was in Samoa.
In a newspaper write-up on Dwayne Johnson’s pilgrimage to his mother’s native Samoa, reporter Peter Dorney\textsuperscript{16} recalls the legend of Vaea who after waiting patiently for his wife and son to return from Fiji comes to the realization that they will never return. But after Apaula returns to Samoa, she is devastated to find her beloved Vaea has transformed into a rock. Today, the lush green slopes of the majestic mountain Vaea\textsuperscript{17} that overlooks the capital of Apia, personifies and memorializes Vaea’s allegiance and love for his Fijian wife Apaula and their only son.

While the traditional legend of Apaula and Vaea would definitely be characterized as a tragedy, Penehuro Papalii and his Samoan colleagues are probably asking us to think otherwise. Are these Samoans from Samoa pleading with Dwayne Johnson, otherwise known to the rest of the world as the Rock (their long lost son), to never forsake the “mythic” homeland of Samoa? Johnson’s celebrity status as an actor and entertainer in Hollywood lends fame and name recognition within popular American culture. As Johnson chooses to spend time in Samoa, away from the glamour and lights of Hollywood, the Samoan community is particularly proud to claim him as one of their own. In fact, there is no doubt that “The Rock” has legions of fans in Samoa—both young and old. But could the gesture of giving Johnson the carving of Vaea be interpreted as an urgent sense of hope? Hope and optimism that “The Rock,” the popular American iconic personality, their long lost son, acknowledge and abettingly declare his Samoan heritage to the rest of the world?

\textsuperscript{17} Mount Vaea incidentally is also the final resting place of Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson who was also referred to as Tusitala meaning the Writer of Tales.
The wood carving of Vaea and Apaula that was presented to Dwayne Johnson also warrants a closer scrutiny of the popular rhetoric or ideology of reminding Samoans to never forsake the memory of Samoa. Over the years, Samoan recordings that depict a nostalgia and longing for the islands by Samoan artists have been quite popular within diasporic Samoan communities as they reflect upon the notion of returning to Samoa some day. A traditional expression I have frequently heard is “E lele le toloa, ae maau I le vai.” This popular saying refers to an indigenous duck in Samoa that will occasionally take flight away from his marshy wetland or habitat. Yet despite his many trips, the toloa will always return to his habitat. This expression also refers to Samoans who may leave Samoa at one point or another and the inherent desire many of them will have to someday return.

**Moral Geographies**

The task of tracing the emergence of a distinctive Samoan identity through tatau both over time and space can prove to be an arduous one but can be made easier through a theoretical concept of “moral geographies.” According to Michael Shapiro, moral geographies “shape human understandings of the world ethically and politically as well as cognitively; they consist of ‘a set of silent ethical assertions’ that mark connection and

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18 One such song would be “Samoa e Lou Atunuu” which has been recorded by many artists such as Poufa Vitale Noga, a diasporic Samoan who goes between Hawaii and Samoa. The R&B sounds of New Zealand born Samoan group Jamoa Jam has also recorded a rendition of song “Lo’u Samoa e Matalasi” which was composed by Matautia Solomon, a prolific songwriter and composer from Samoa.

19 Consequently, this has led me to think about the importance of Samoa as the mythic homeland or land of origin for all Samoans; this thought could also correlate with the notion that all Polynesians originated from one distinct place: Hawaiki. In fact, filmmaker Emiko Omori draws upon this same notion in the popular film documentary “Skin Stories” as she attempts to trace the origins of the traditional art-form of ta tatau. Tracing its origins to the islands of Samoa, the film essentially attempts to trace the evolution, demise and contemporary revival of the art-form of ta tatau in other Polynesian communities such as Aotearoa, Tonga, and Hawaii.
The Samoan tradition of malaga or movement of people has created vastly separated Samoan communities over time that have been able to maintain their shared identities through this notion of moral geographies. If we considered the precolonial contact Samoans maintained between the Tongans and Fijians, the need for a group identity would have been critical to safeguarding and asserting territorial claims that sustained and legitimized their sole purpose for existing and functioning. Therefore, in addressing the need to assert a collective sense of identity, incorporating the concept of malaga as one form of moral geography would seem necessary.

The concept of malaga literally means to travel and is associated with excursions and trips Samoans often embarked upon. Malaga is a significant feature within the faasamoa as it was not uncommon for individuals or groups to travel or visit each other on a regular basis. In Robert Franco’s dissertation, a seminal work pertaining to Samoan travel and migration, malaga is prefaced as an essential characteristic of the Samoan experience as a strategy to “keep kinship relations warm.” Saili Lilomaiava Doktor provides additional insight on malaga in her dissertation:

Malaga is the Samoan word for “migration” or more accurately travel back and forth. It implies both visiting and returning, irrespective of duration. Malaga is also the polite word for both alu (go) and sau (come). Simultaneously, malaga is a noun describing formal traveling parties of two or more people. A malaga is a ceremonial, planned visit following Samoan custom. It suggests dignified activity. . . The basis for malaga is in the life cycle, cultural events surrounding births, marriages, and funerals. However, contemporary movements for the purposes of education, health and economic opportunities have broadened its scope.

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22 Dissertations on Samoan migrant communities have since been produced and written about. Notably, Vaa’s study on Samoans in Australia and Koletty’s study on Samoans in Los Angeles.
The term malaga, is also used to describe our being on earth as a spiritual journey. Malaga therefore has both physical and metaphysical attributes.\textsuperscript{24}

Through malaga, Samoans were able to maintain contact through aiga or kinship—particularly over great geographical distances. Therefore, malaga was not restricted to travel in and between the islands of Samoa; in fact, the migratory circuits of malaga were also known to include the neighboring islands of Tonga, Fiji, Niue, Tokelau and even Tahiti where Samoans may have had relatives or acquaintances. Today, moral geographies could also include the migratory patterns of malaga or networks that are now evident throughout regions across the United States, New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom, Japan, the Middle-East and even Africa. For diasporic Samoans, our journey initially traces back to Samoa—"Sa" meaning sacred and "moa" meaning center from which all forms of life originate.

\textsuperscript{24} Doktor, "Fa'a-Samoan and Population Movement from the inside Out: The Case of Salelologa, Savai'i." 191-192.
MISSING PAGE(S)
Pg. 33
Chapter IV: "Worn with Pride": Exhibiting the Tatau-ed Body

“Our art comes from the depths of our ocean to the tops of our mountains, and it is written all over our body.”
Wilson Fitiao

“Cultural identity . . . is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.”
Stuart Hall

Samoan Diasporic Identity

Since the 1950s, the emergence of Samoan communities beyond the shores of Samoa has been impressive. From their communal villages in Samoa, Samoan families have gone from “local” to “global” as diasporic Samoans have created an intricate network of communities far removed from Samoa. To date, the Samoan diaspora would include sites such as: Anchorage, Copenhagen, Houston, London, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New York, Seattle, Suva, and Sydney.

To illustrate the complexity of cultural identity for diasporic Samoans in the United States, I will provide a textual analysis of a museum exhibit “Worn with Pride: Celebrating Samoan Artistic Heritage” which was held at the Oceanside Museum of Art (OMA) in 2000. Commemorating a yearlong celebration of the Samoan community or American Samoan culture, the exhibit was one of a number of activities and events held

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1 Teri L Sowell, Worn with Pride: Celebrating Samoan Artistic Heritage (Oceanside: Oceanside Museum of Art, 2000).
within the community of Oceanside. In a quarterly publication *Oceanside* dated Summer 2000, details of a collaboration between the Oceanside Public Library and the Oceanside Museum of Art, in partnership with the Samoan Sister City Committee was featured. In order to “recognize the celebration of the centennial of American Samoa’s status as a territory of the United States and acknowledge the important contribution of Samoans to the cultural and artistic life of the United States,” numerous programs were implemented as part of the festivities. Many of the festivities were based upon the Samoan proverb “O le ala I le Pule o le Tautua” which literally translates as the path to leadership is through service. From this particular proverb the phrase “Sulu o le Tautua” was derived as a tribute to “the Samoan service men and women who have served the people and government of the United States and, indeed all Samoan people both in Oceanside and in Samoa.” In hindsight, the events and festivities such as the museum exhibit “Worn with Pride” were intended as an honorific tribute to Samoans everywhere.

To foster a sense of appreciation for the Samoan artistic heritage, Teri Sowell, the curator of “Worn with Pride” confirms that the premise of the exhibit is to place emphasis on the traditional Samoan notions of “dressing the body.” By looking at various forms of Samoan dress, the exhibit highlights the tatau, siapo (bark cloth), ‘ie toga (fine mats), and tuiga (ceremonial dress). In fact, Sowell emphasizes the importance of the human body as “a powerful vehicle for visual expression [which ultimately]... allows a person to express individuality while engaging in a variety of cultural conversations.”

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4 Interpreted as the “Torch of Service”
5 “Oceanside Celebrates 100th Birthday of American Samoa.”
6 Sowell is not Samoan but is a resident of Vista, a neighboring town of Oceanside within the San Diego County. A trained art historian, Sowell also teaches at San Diego State University and the University of California system and does a tremendous amount of outreach with the Samoan community in Oceanside.
7 Sowell, *Worn with Pride: Celebrating Samoan Artistic Heritage.*
Sowell also elaborates on the crucial moments or transitions which then warrant the “dressing of the body” which could include commemorating the birth of a family member, graduating from a school, weddings, title bestowals or investitures and of course, funerals. In fact, Sowell further explains:

By artistically dressing the body, Samoans acknowledge and celebrate the transitions between these stages of life... While the importance of the dressed body is a deeply rooted link with the past, Samoans continue to creatively alter and enhance artistic forms to keep them contemporary and relevant, and thereby continually reaffirming the expressive place of self embellishment in fa’a Samoa.8

As Sowell insists that there is direct correlation between “the dressed body” and “the past,” Jane C. Desmond reiterates the same notion in her book Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World as she asserts that: “the public display of bodies and their materiality (how bodies look, what they do, where they do it, who watches, and under what conditions) are profoundly important in structuring identity categories and notions of subjectivity.”9 For me, both Sowell and Desmond suggest that the multiple ways in which people display their bodies is indicative of how people choose to affiliate or identify themselves. By considering the “Worn with Pride” museum exhibit as a possible site of identity, one can deduce how Samoans in Oceanside or in the diaspora, for that matter, incorporate traditional Samoan art-forms to make valid statements as expressions of their cultural identity.

When Teri Sowell dedicates “Worn with Pride” to the younger generation of Samoans in Oceanside in the catalogue, she also reveals how she was inspired by conversations with them. But as “Worn with Pride” is dedicated to these younger

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8 Sowell, Worn with Pride: Celebrating Samoan Artistic Heritage.
9 Jane Desmond, Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
Samoans who have been “struggling with issues of personal and cultural identity,”10 is Sowell suggesting that there is an underlying tension within the Samoan community in Oceanside as to how Samoan-ness is represented? As generations of Samoans are born and raised in Oceanside, the question of how traditions and notions within the faasamoa is interpreted and embodied is worthy of discussion.

For Macy Pegina Faumuina, a diasporic Samoan, who was born and raised in Oceanside, Samoa has a special place in her heart. As a 12th grader in 2001, Faumuina offered an insightful perspective on what it means to be Samoan in Oceanside, California.

Roughly 4,500 miles southwest of San Diego lies the heart of Polynesia, the small islands of American and Western Samoa. Imagine Hawaii: the warm nights, crashing waves, and swaying palm trees. From San Diego, Samoa is twice as far as Hawaii, and has twice the beauty. Oceanside, Calif., contains an enormous population of Samoan people. Most of us have only heard of Samoa, but have never seen it. We are tied by the roots of our elders and are planting our own roots here, in the States.11

On one level, Faumuina’s description of Oceanside with relation to both Hawaii and Samoa is interesting: she clearly positions herself as a diasporic person who has never set foot on Samoan soil, imagining Samoa to be a place of lush beauty with tropical balmy weather. Yet what is striking in Faumuina’s prose is the way in which she contextualizes the faasamoa where she attributes her knowledge of Samoa to a nostalgic memory or lived experience of an older generation of Samoans; in her case, it is the memory of her grandfather. Faumuina’s narrative prompts me to think of other diasporic Samoans who do not have a connection or link to Samoa: when memory or nostalgia is inaccessible, how do diasporic Samoans form and articulate specific notions of a Samoan identity?

10 Sowell, Worn with Pride: Celebrating Samoan Artistic Heritage.
While not all diasporic Samoans in the United States are as fortunate as Faumuina, the assumption that Samoans inevitably create identities that are reflective of a culture they identify with is usually the norm—even in place where other cultures are represented.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall who has published extensively on the Black Carribean diasporic experience asserts that cultural identities within a diaspora are often subject to change and negotiation. Hall also insists that “our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history.”12 As a diasporic Samoan, the ability to articulate what these “continuous frames of reference” mean to other Samoans in the diaspora is of particular significance to me. Hall’s premise that cultural identity is inevitably determined by “the positions from which we speak or write”13 provides a conceptual framework through which a broad range of interpretations regarding Samoan-ness can be solicited.

Writer Sia Figiel is an example of someone who is eager to understand her own “position-ing” as a diasporic Samoan when she raises the following questions: “What is the center, I kept asking myself—this was a question that enveloped me for a while—while living in Berlin—is the center more important than the periphery? How important is it to be in the center? Where is the center? Is there a center?”14 Born to a Polish American father and a Samoan mother in Western Samoa, Sia Figiel has lived in New Zealand, Germany, the United States and now American Samoa. As an award-winning

12 Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." 223.
13 Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." 222
14 Sia Figiel, "A Writer's Story," To a Young Artist in Contemplation (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 1998).
writer, Figiel continues to travel extensively throughout the world and I am certain that as she visits more sites outside of Samoa, frames of reference pertaining to faasamoa will also change. With diasporic Samoans like Figiel, it is crucial to remember that diasporic Samoans, by virtue of their knowledge of traditions associated with the faasamoa as they live outside of Samoa, become quite adept at “engaging in a variety of cultural conversations” as they actively seek to depict their Samoan-ness with an immense sense of pride.

“Worn with Pride”

“There are no ‘true interpreters’ or ‘sacred guardians’ of any culture. We are all entitled to our truths, insights, and intuitions into and interpretations of our cultures.”

Albert Wendt

In 2000, within the city of Oceanside, a year long celebration of the Samoan community or American Samoan culture coincided with the 100th anniversary of American Samoa becoming an unincorporated territory of the United States. To commemorate this celebration, the Oceanside Museum of Art (hereafter OMA) featured an exhibit entitled “Worn with Pride: Celebrating Samoan Artistic Heritage.”

Within the OMA’s official press release, the “Worn with Pride” exhibit is referenced as:

A pioneering exhibition that pays tribute to the cultural, material and decorative arts of American Samoa and the expression of those arts by Samoans living here in San Diego County... Despite American Samoa’s long association with the United States and the substantial population of...
Samoans in the San Diego (and especially Oceanside) area, San Diegans are generally unaware of the richness and vitality of traditional and contemporary Samoan art. 17

As part of its institutional obligations to its constituents, Skip Pahl, the director of the OMA acknowledges within the “Worn with Pride” catalogue that in order “to be truly relevant, a regional museum such as Oceanside Museum of Art should reflect the communities it serves.” 18

However, a closer reading of the OMAs statement would also show that there is an apparent sense of urgency to make younger Samoans more aware of their cultural heritage as it is desirable for “second and third generation Samoan American youth to experience a greater appreciation of their own cultural heritage.” 19 Could we speculate that the OMA board believed the children of first generation Samoan immigrants in Oceanside were too far removed from Samoa as the homeland or place of origin and possessed only a superficial understanding of the faasamoa? The assumption that younger Samoans have an inadequate knowledge of things deemed Samoan then raises questions about the exhibit: could the OMA exhibit “Worn with Pride” be suggesting to younger Samoans like Macy Faumuina that traditional notions of dress and behavior within the faasamoa are more acceptable or appropriate over others that are perhaps used within the diaspora? Could the OMA have regarded young Samoans like Macy Faumuina as not being Samoan enough? Another question to consider is whether there a particular code of Samoan-ness diasporic Samoans must adhere or ascribe to; Is there a right way or appropriate way to exercise Samoan-ness? In posing these questions, the boundaries of

18 Sowell, *Worn with Pride: Celebrating Samoan Artistic Heritage*.
19 Sowell, *Worn with Pride: Celebrating Samoan Artistic Heritage*. 
Samoan-ness are further articulated allowing us to define Samoan-ness using specific terms.

In the museum exhibit catalog, Sowell also identifies another significant aspect associated with the tradition of ta tatau amongst diasporic Samoans citing how it “transforms the wearer’s sense of self [as] Samoans . . . universally speak of the inner change they experience while undergoing the process of outward marking.” For Samoans who choose to bear the mark of the tatau, the physical pain inflicted upon the body is symbolic of “collective suffering” as they reify ties to their aiga and the faasamoa—even from diasporic spaces or sites such as Oceanside, California. The museum exhibit then emerges as a site of identity whereby connections with the motherland or homeland of Samoa are deeply embedded.

Yet Stuart Hall asserts that even within communities whereby order or continuity is traced, difference is apparent as “the boundaries of difference are continually repositioned in relation to different points of reference.” My first-cousin, Marissa Leniu, a second generation diasporic Samoan born and raised in Oceanside, provides a classic example of how elements of “difference” can pervade one’s sense of community. In a personal email she sent to me, she expressed her thoughts and reflections on the community’s general response to the museum exhibit “Worn with Pride.”

There are those who focus more on the dances and the music . . . With the Sister City events that Oceanside hosts every two years, it is always crowded. Every Samoan is there guaranteed! Why? Because of the food and the dancing. But when the museum [OMA] hosts an exhibit pertaining

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20 Sowell, Worn with Pride: Celebrating Samoan Artistic Heritage.
21 Pain experienced when a tatau is received using the traditional implement of the au—discussion is raised in my introductory chapter.
22 Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." 227.
to the faasamoa with pictures and displays, it wasn’t taken as seriously as Sister City had been.  

Leniu’s observation of the “Worn with Pride” exhibit and the Samoan community’s general response to it in terms of the attendance is to some degree disheartening; on one level, we can only regret what the youth missed out on if they did not express an interest in the exhibit at all. But on another level, Leniu’s disdain for the youth who chose food and dancing at the Sister City celebration or festivities over the actual museum exhibit reconfirms Stuart Hall’s previous claim regarding the degree of difference within a particular community.

While the OMA had specific objectives concerning the museum exhibit and how it should address the needs of the Samoan community, Leniu’s comments reflect that many of her Samoan peers did not share the same concerns. In fact, Leniu emphasizes that her peers made conscious decisions not to attend the actual museum site. Contrary to what the OMA had purported earlier, does this imply that younger Samoans in Oceanside are actually secure in their knowledge of the faasamoa? Perhaps we could assume that younger Samoans know enough about the faasamoa than the OMA is actually acknowledging. What is interesting to note here in this particular scenario is the fact that younger Samoans in Oceanside were more inclined to enjoy the festivities as opposed to the museum exhibit “Worn with Pride.” Reporter Candice Reed of The North County Times reveals that over 500 people from the community were in attendance at the festivities. Members of the American Samoan Community College Performing Arts were

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flown in from American Samoa. Reed provides an elaborate description of the opening nights festivities:

As the sun began to set, the traditional Kava ceremony began with more than 100 students from the American Samoan College performing to recognize dignitaries. "This is very exciting to come here and share these dances and songs from our homeland," said spokeswoman Regina Meredith Malala. "Aside from the celebrating we are here to share our daily life with the people who left for the mainland. This is a very exciting week for us." As a young woman in a finely woven mat dress, a tuiga headress made of human hair, feathers and shells and bracelets of boar tusks walked toward the stage, 15 bodyguards dressed only in lava-lava wraps walked closely beside her and the celebration began.\textsuperscript{25}

Regina Meredith Malala’s comments warrant another perspective on the Samoan cultural festivities in Oceanside and how Samoans in Oceanside may have responded. Meredith Malala’s remarks could be insinuating that the diasporic community in Oceanside, (by virtue of their having left Samoa) needs to be reminded of how the faasamoana should be embodied through the performance of tradition—perhaps this is why younger Samoans in Oceanside were more inclined to attend the cultural festivities versus the museum exhibit. The actual "learning" of a particular tradition is more meaningful when it is actually performed within an atmosphere that is more conducive to social interaction through entertainment and the notion of public performance.

Yet from another vantage point, one also wonders how different the festivities would have been if Samoans in Oceanside had performed the kava ceremony. For one thing, Samoans in Oceanside do not all come from the same village or district in either American Samoa or the independent nation of Samoa. For instance, some families may hail from either Tutuila or Manua in American Samoa and other families may come from Upolu or Savaii in independent Samoa. Therefore, the Samoan community in Oceanside

\textsuperscript{25}Reed, "Oceanside Launches Samoan Celebration."
is by no means a homogenous group as they represent various villages in both Samoas. In each of these places, there are perhaps different ways of performing protocol with something such as the ava ceremony. For that reason alone, if the Samoan community came together as an organization to perform the tradition of the ava ceremony, they would have been assembled as an “ad hoc” committee or group. In hindsight, the performance and negotiation of the protocol for the kava ceremony would have reflected various levels of understanding and experience of the tradition suggesting a lack of uniformity or cohesion. Perhaps this is why the presence of the American Samoan Community College Performance group at these festivities in Oceanside was warranted; but one cannot help but wonder whether they were invited by community leaders in Oceanside so as to foster within the diasporic Samoan community of San Diego a desire or longing for that which is authentic or traditional.

In her text *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*²⁶, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill evokes a poignant metaphor to describe the on-going collaboration between museums and communities. As museums conscientiously strive to represent and reflect the diversified needs of their constituents, the inevitability that certain narratives, histories and identities become validated or legitimated over others can be both encouraging and disorienting. In an attempt to describe this recent trend, Hooper-Greenhill explains,

> The map has been used as a metaphor for the museum, which plots material geographies of taste and value . . . . To be ‘off the map’ is to be of no significance, to be obsolete or unknown; to be ‘on the map’ is to be acknowledged, given a position, accorded an existence or an importance . . . . being placed on the map gives legitimation.²⁷

²⁷ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*. 
Through the “Worn with Pride” exhibit, the presence and cultural significance of Samoans within Oceanside is acknowledged. For generations of diasporic Samoans living in Oceanside, the “Worn with Pride” exhibit lends them a sense of credibility and cultural equality with their non-Samoan counterparts—a public acknowledgement that is perhaps long overdue. Yet on the last page of the catalogue where the OMA acknowledges its board, staff and committee members who were intimately involved with coordinating the exhibit, I find it problematic that only one Samoan individual is acknowledged as a “Samoan Community Liaison.” Although the exhibit had positive ramifications on the Samoan community in Oceanside, I would like to suggest that the exhibit itself could have been much more effective and representative of the Samoan community, had the OMA collaborated with more Samoans.

Figure 5: “Worn with Pride” Exhibit at the Oceanside Museum of Art, 2000. Photograph featured in “Worn With Pride” Exhibit Catalog.
Yet while the Samoan community receives this acknowledgement and validation through the museum exhibit, the discrepancy with regard to notions of Samoan-ness between diasporic Samoans in the United States and Samoans in favor of preserving traditions from a "purist" standpoint is apparent. As a result, debate over whether traditions are maintained "authentically" emerges as a critical question. This debate is not limited to representations of culture outside of Samoa, but is also a frequent topic between the two Samoan polities of American Samoa and independent Samoa. Nonetheless, the politics of representation as it would pertain to identities associated with specific notions or traditions within the faasamoa or Samoan diasporic communities for that matter is extremely diverse and complex. As a possible site of identity, the museum exhibit "Worn with Pride" may have been conceptualized with specific objectives intended for younger Samoans in Oceanside. The OMA may have felt a moral obligation to educate their younger Samoan constituents about a heritage or past they were already very much aware of or had little interest in to begin with. On the other hand, perhaps these same youth felt they could learn more about the faasamoa through the Sister City festivities as certain traditions such as the ava ceremony were performed in public by actual practitioners from Samoa i.e. the American Samoan Community College Performing Group. But however one decides to look at all of this, one recurring theme in this chapter is the way in which specific notions of Samoan-ness or identity are filtered or transmitted through the collective memory and knowledge of either older generations of Samoans or with articulated sites of identity such as the OMAs exhibit of "Worn with Pride." As notions of Samoan-ness become complex with the emergence of diasporic Samoan communities beyond the familiar or unfamiliar terrain of our beloved
mother/homeland of Samoa, so too are the interpretations and expressions of what it means to be Samoan here within the United States.
Chapter V: Two Case Studies: Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E and Dwayne Johnson—Proclaiming Samoan-ness through the Tradition of Ta tatau

“Samoan towns were worse than most, and included Carson, a suburb of Los Angeles, where there were more Samoans than in the whole of the Samoan islands . . . The Samoans’ large physical size served them well in football (nearly every professional football team in the NFL had its Samoan tackles), and some 500 pounders had succeeded as ozeki, champion sumo wrestlers, or musicians—the Boo Yaa Tribe, a quintet of shaven-headed fatties, had made a fortune in Los Angeles imitating black rappers.”

Paul Theroux

While travel writer Paul Theroux addresses stereotypical assumptions or notions most commonly associated with diasporic Samoans, his thick description of the so-called prototypical Samoan in the United States warrants closer scrutiny. In 2000, a joke entitled “How You Know You’re Samoan If . . .” proved to be very popular as it was circulated extensively amongst various circles of diasporic Samoans (and was subsequently cross-listed to me several times within that same year). While it is evident that the list was compiled by a diasporic Samoan (from the commonwealth) it could definitely be interpreted as a self-effacing yet effective approach to gauge the stereotypical notions most commonly associated with diasporic Samoans.

HOW YOU KNOW YOU’RE SAMOAN IF . . .

1. You have ever gotten spanked with a rubber jandal and had to go fetch it first.
2. You get to your house blindfolded by the smell of KFC.
3. You have a big velvet picture of the Last Supper and Elvis in your living room.

2 Any reference to the commonwealth is an reference to anyone who is from a country or nation state within the commonwealth most typically affiliated with the United Kingdom For diasporic Samoans, the commonwealth would be include the nation-states of Samoa, Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, Europe and the UK.
4. You impulsively grab for your wallet whenever anyone mentions the words “faifeau” or “faalavelave.”
6. You have a drunk uncle who almost always starts fights at family weddings.
7. You need a sleep after every meal.
8. Your sister has more muscular legs than your brothers.
9. One of your aunts weighs over 300 pounds.
10. You have sat in a two-passenger car with over eight people in it.
11. You have a dozen pictures of Jesus in your house.
12. You believe that Bruce Lee is Samoan.
13. You scratch with four fingers above your right ear before you bash.
14. Your dinner consists of taro, banana, and 12 types of meat.
15. You know the difference between all the various types of corned beef.
16. One of your parents gave you a hiding in front of your friends.
17. You’ve been given a hiding in public.
18. You’ve received a hiding that has lasted 20-30 minutes and continually asked during the beating “Why are you crying for?”
19. One of your parents threatened to kill your girl/boyfriend.
20. You have a machete in the boot of the family car.

While the list is intentionally meant to generate a few laughs amongst diasporic Samoans and non-Samoans alike, many of the characteristics attributed to Samoans is all too painfully true. As a matter of fact, many of these attributes conjure specific images of Samoans as being physically aggressive, violent, indulgent, authoritative and yet extremely fervent and religious regarding their fundamental Judeo-Christian beliefs. In addition, the list stresses particular emphasis on a certain relationship existent between parents and children based on the fundamental value of faaaloalo or respect within the faasamoa. From day one, Samoan children are taught to honor their elders and parents; therefore, any Samoan who actively or purposely defies this code of ethics has committed the ultimate “cardinal sin”—the disavowal of one’s parents.

\[3\] This is aligned with the biblical commandment of honoring one’s parents so that one’s days may be lengthened.
Nonetheless, Paul Theroux’s reference to the Boo Yaa T.R.I.B.E as a “quintet of shaven headed fatties”\(^4\) who supposedly create a fortune by imitating African American rap artists may have been intended to be humorous. But for any diasporic Samoan like myself, I find Theroux’s callous comments extremely demeaning and insulting. Although Theroux’s acknowledgement of the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E’s success is indicative of their prolific status as diasporic Samoans who are actively involved in creating a public consciousness of what Samoan-ness is across American diasporic sites, to what extent does their music or representation of Samoa-ness contribute to a burgeoning American awareness or consciousness of Samoan-ness?

April Henderson who has conducted extensive research on hip-hop within the Samoan diaspora describes the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E as such:

The T.R.I.B.E’s signature long hair, typically arranged in neat braids, numerous tattoos invoking Samoa (“Samoa” in large Old English script across a belly, “Pago Pago” around a collarbone) and, probably above all, their physical size, have assured the Devoux brothers a singular image amongst Los Angeles artists. “We let our image speak for itself,” states one Boo-Yaa, “people see us they know. Our crowds don’t even move because they are so shocked. We take our hair down and let it go ... the whole crowd goes crazy.” As one of the first Samoan acts to make the move from dancing to music, Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E. is largely responsible for introducing Samoans into the hip-hop mainstream, and their imposing image has contributed to mainstream conceptions of Samoan artists.\(^5\)

Henderson’s acknowledgement of the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E’s significance within the entertainment/hip-hop industry is vital to other diasporic Samoans artists. However, in this chapter, I analyze the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E and their most recent album “West Koasta

\(^4\) This claim is false as the Boo Yaa TRIBE have never had short hair. Since their debut in 1983-1984 in a video entitled "they have always maintained long hair in order to have braids. I don’t know how Theroux came to this conclusion.

Nostra” which was released in October 2003 featuring other prominent rap artists such as Mack 10, Eminem, and B-Real of Cypress Hill.

From numerous articles, interviews and images of the Boo Yaa T.R.I.B.E rendered or presented by the media, the images of their tatau-ed bodies are visible and blatant expressions or markers of identity. By assessing their album “West Koasta Nostra” a discussion or study of the contemporary variations of their tatau and how they may differ from the traditional notions or representations of tatau as exhibited by diasporic Samoans in the United States also allows us to question the extent to which the Boo Yaa T.R.I.B.E gauge Samoan-ness as discussed in the preceding chapters of this thesis. Another important discussion thread worth exploring is the extent in which the Boo Yaa T.R.I.B.E borrow from other ethnic groups, communities or subcultures within America to assert their own unique expression of cultural identity.

Boo Yaa T.R.I.B.E and “West Koasta Nostra”

“The new album man, I tell you right now, the ‘West Koasta Nostra’ is the story of a family struggle. It’s about a family that’s coming together, that’s going to bring this whole thing back together, and that’s what it is all about right now.”

Godfather

While earlier references to the “global family” distinguish the elaborate networking of Samoan communities (both in Samoa and in the diaspora) the same can be projected of the BooYaa T.R.I.B.E who epitomize the most basic assumptions of family. In their latest album “West Koasta Nostra,” the family unit is reified and validated as they each refer to themselves as blood brothers with a motive to restore the order to the West

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Coast family of gangsta/rap artists. Within this particular network, there is a designated godfather—in the same fashion as an Italian mafia family which essentially illustrates a willingness on Boo-Yaa’s part to incorporate elements from other subcultures or groups per se. In an interview with SpiceRadio.com Boo-Yaa member Gawtti is quoted as saying: “Family’s all we got”\(^7\) with reference to their main audience i.e. their street family. Therefore, the family takes on multiple meanings as they establish themselves as a credible gangsta/rap act within mainstream rap.

Figure 6: BooYaa T.R.I.B.E—Cover of Album “West Koasta Nostra” October 2003

On the album cover of Boo Yaa T.R.I.B.E’s “West Koasta Nostra” appear four bare chested group members in sepia print. As variations of tatau are splayed across their massive bodies, one particular tatau inscribed upon each of their bodies in old English print is “SAMOA.” Positioned strategically above the upper torso, this particular tattoo could be interpreted as a blatant expression or marker of identity. In fact, one could assume that the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E do not want to be mistakenly identified with any other ethnic group. To borrow street lingo or jargon, the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E are “loud and proud” and particularly conscious about how they “represent their roots.” As the Godfather reflects upon their tatau, he shares this particular perspective on the tradition of ta tatau:

Actually, tattoos originated from the islands, you know? The original tattoo word is called ta-tow; in English, that’s tattoo. Tatow in Samoan means tattoo. So it originated from our islands in the South Pacific: Fiji and Samoa. What happened is that we adapted here in Los Angeles to a lot of gangs affiliates who turned around and used tattoos, but it was more than what these little youngstas are doing now, just throwing them on and they have no meaning. Everything on us, and everything on me, means something. It means where I am from, who I roll with. Muthaphuckaz den died over that shit cuz of that, you know what I mean. The thing with tattoos is that it ain’t no joke. It’s what you sport on your body. It ain’t no thing where it is an image thing or whatever like that. And people these days, little rappers, want to get out there and “Yeah, I go get my tattoo.” Where we come from, homie, that’s a serious thing. What’s on your body is the story of your life, who’s your family, your loved ones, people that you have lost, the neighborhood that you represent, you know what I mean, and that’s why it is sacred, on the real. You know, so that’s what the tattoos are all about, dogg.  

As I reflect upon Godfather’s explanation of Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E’s tatau, I am reminded of my uncle who has a similar tatau inscribed upon his body: across his chest, the word “SAMOA” is inscribed in big bold letters. My uncle is based in Auckland, New Zealand  

JR, Real Talk: An Innerview with Godfather of Boo-Yaa Tribe.
and has been married to a Maori woman for over thirty years. Given Auckland’s ethnically diverse population, my uncle has been mistaken for being Maori primarily because of his association with his wife. Frustrated by this, my uncle was determined to show people that he was Samoan and not Maori. In the same manner as the Boo Yaa T.R.I.B.E, my uncle bears his Samoan-ness like a badge of honor and is particularly “loud and proud” as he displays his tatau.

Yet despite my uncle’s attempts to exhibit or display his personal allegiances to the faasamoa, my uncle ironically does not associate himself with things that are typically deemed “Samoan.” For instance, he does not attend a Samoan church and he does not actively participate in family faalavelave that obviously frustrate other members of his aiga. Although my uncle was born and raised in Samoa and speaks Samoan fluently, he does not speak Samoan at all to any of his children or grandchildren. I can only speculate that he along with other migrant Samoans who settled in New Zealand may have felt things associated with Samoan-ness would only prove to be an unnecessary burden. So while other diasporic Samoans in New Zealand may strongly identify with components of culture such as language to express their love of the faasamoa, my uncle has made a conscious decision not to.
Figure 7: Boo-Yaa TRIBE members featured in their “element” bearing variations of traditional Samoan tatau—accessorized with weights and weapons.

Interestingly, Henderson describes a similar dilemma with the Boo Yaa T.R.I.B.E and their actual interaction with things deemed “Samoan” by diasporic Samoans in the United States. Henderson essentially claims how “their Samoaness is translated and modified by their environment.” Yet while their version or interpretation of Samoaness may differ from someone is based in Anchorage, Alaska or St Cloud, Minnesota, the Boo Yaa T.R.I.B.E are no less authentic in their expression of Samoan-ness as they pay tribute to the tradition of ta tatau and their ancestors, families and respective community. Are they not remembering the past as they assert their identities as diasporic Samoans? In a sense, they could be seen as honoring the past or their heritage. For some Samoans, the

extent to which the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E may identify with things associated with Samoanness can appear to be disappointing as they,

[Do not rap in the Samoan language, or incorporate many Samoan words into their lyrics. They are quick to acknowledge the influence of Fa'aSamoa values, such as respect for parents and familial allegiance, but the language they use to characterize those values is interesting . . . . Fiercely proud of their Samoan ancestry yet intent on remaining true to their urban California upbringing, Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E represent the embodiment of so many apparent contradictions.]

If members of the Boo Yaa T.R.I.B.E embody "apparent contradictions" as Henderson alludes to, could they be considered a "sell-out" to other diasporic Samoans who are reluctant to compromise their Samoan-ness at least within the public sphere or arena where the expression of performative notions associated with one's cultural identity would be seen as critical? Shouldn't their international status as rap artists be sufficient in that they're making Samoan-ness visible to the rest of the world?

In a biography of the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E, Steve Huey notes that the Devoux brothers were raised in a rough neighborhood and "were drawn into gang culture as a survival tactic with the Mob Piru Bloods." On a website dedicated to fans of the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E group, web-master Robert H. aka Beaga recalls how the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E group members were a "Samoan Clan [who] lived by the gun [and as a result] each of them endured a stretch in prison." Nonetheless, the pivotal point for all six brothers was the death of their older brother Robert which then in turn prompted them to leave the gang life. Huey further comments that after "[q]uitting cold turkey, the brothers

left Los Angeles and moved to Japan but later returned back to L.A. to produce a subsequent number of albums.

In his own biography of the group, Beaga traces another significant change within the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E as they transformed themselves into a group reflecting “a Mafia type structure.” By incorporating certain characteristics of a mafia group, the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E members could continue to take care of business on their own terms and yet at the same time, maintain their ties as “blood brothers”; but however one decides to look at it, through “thick and thin” the Devoux brothers have ultimately stood by each other. In his insightful book *American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business and the End of White America*, African American Leon E. Wynter states that “in some senses, but especially in popular culture and lifestyle, all Americans simultaneously inhabit multiple worlds, materializing and dematerializing from one dimension to another at will, provided they have the cash and, for non-whites, a certain degree of earned, borrowed or begged white privilege.” The Devoux brothers best illustrate this as they borrow power or privilege from other ethnic groups and communities that they may have interaction with.

As the balance of “borrowing” of power and “white privilege” is evident within the Boo-Yaa TRIBE’s claim to fame and the production of their music and inevitable blend of multiple identities or allegiances, the marketing strategy behind “West Koasta Nostra” warrants a closer analysis. In the music video of the track “Bang-On” (which is featured in a promotional DVD for the album “West Koasta Nostra”) each of the group members is featured: Ted aka Samoan Godfather, Paul aka Gangxta Ridd, Danny aka

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Monsta O, Donald aka Kobra Konvict, Vincent aka Gawtti and lastly Roscoe aka Murder One. Living life at the edge or the periphery, the group members are surrounded by fast cars (such as SUVs and vintage racing cars), fast bikes (Harley Davidsons), and women scantily clad in g-string bikinis and six inch stiletto heels. Another poignant scene in the same music video is that of a meeting or conference which is also referred to as a “sit-down” in a big warehouse somewhere in Los Angeles. At this roundtable, other reputable rap artists from the West Coast are in attendance to offer support as the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E launches their latest venture: “West Koasta Nostra.”

On one level, these two varied depictions of the Samoan Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E is disturbing: as a diasporic Samoan, I want to see them explore more of their Samoan-ness. As rap-artists in the mainstream, I am convinced that the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E is in a position to endorse or address pertinent issues pertaining to diasporic Samoans and their communities at large. But another question that surfaces is this: to what extent is the Boo-Yaa TRIBE’s music reflective or representative of other Samoans within the diaspora?

From another diasporic site within the “global family,” New Zealand based Samoan writer and cultural critic Albert Wendt makes a significant connection between tatau-ing and the post-colonial body. In his perceptive essay “Tatauing the Post Colonial Body” Wendt articulates:

In a deep psychological, mythological, symbolic way, tatauing is the act of printing or scripting a genealogical-spiritual-philosophical text on the blood, of testing it to see if it can bear the pain of being in a human body, of storying it, giving it human design, shape, form and identity yet risking all of that if the tatauing results in your bleeding to death or your contracting AIDS.  

In this particular essay, Wendt could be describing the Boo Yaa T.R.I.B.E as a cadre of post-colonial artists, engaged in the actual “scripting” of texts—that is, through their distinctive Samoan tatau.

**The Rock aka Dwayne Johnson and Peter Maivia**

“The dance of the Tatau is ancient in its origin and is a response to an even older rhythm of cosmic music... Tatau is the dance that connects... He or she who seeks the dance must cultivate the ability to hear and sense the rhythms over the distracting din of western noise... The tatau connects one with life.”

Papalii Dr Failautusi Avegalio¹⁷

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Figure 8: Dwayne Johnson’s Samoan tatau—also commonly referred to as a “tribal sleeve.”

After his highly publicized trip to Samoa in August of 2004, Dwayne Johnson, also known as “The Rock,” was interviewed by People Magazine and commented on the significance of his “big Samoan tattoos”:

My tattoo tells a story about my successes and failure, my strength and warrior spirit, my love for my family, my loyalty to my family, my unwavering want to protect the ones I love, which is why my tattoo acts like a shield that covers a little bit of my chest and down my shoulder and little bit down my back. My grandfather was completely tattooed. It went from his knees to right underneath his neck. It was done old-school style, with a bone and mallet.\(^\text{18}\)

Johnson associates the tradition of ta tatau and his own rendering of tatau with his Samoan grandfather, Peter Fanene Maivia. Although Johnson is afa kasi—or half Samoan—his tatau is clearly a marker of his Samoan identity and the intrinsic values of love, honor, and respect embodied within the faasamoa. While Johnson was born in Hayward, California, his diasporic upbringing across various sites commonly associated within the Samoan migratory circuit is evident as he claims to have lived in Auckland, Honolulu, Pennsylvania, Florida and Los Angeles. Numerous reports and interviews in the media frequently cite how much Johnson misses his maternal grandfather, the legendary Peter Fanene Maivia, who died of cancer at the age of 49 in 1982. As a professional wrestler in the United States, Maivia was very much a household name as he entertained generations of Americans on televised wrestling matches from the 1960s up until his untimely death. In fact, Maivia is considered a major influence on other

professional wrestlers such as Afa and Sika Anoai (who are widely known as the “Wild Samoans”), Jimmy “Superfly” Snuka and Billy Graham. These same wrestling matches were televised or broadcast on American Samoa’s government owned and operated television stations KVZK-TV\textsuperscript{19} while I was a child living in American Samoa. Broadcast every Sunday evening after the televised Sauniga Lotu\textsuperscript{20}, entertainment wrestling was affectionately referred to as “piiga.”\textsuperscript{21} In fact, piiga had an appeal to Samoans of all ages—both young and old. I have vivid memories of my own extended family literally gathering around a small black and white television—engrossed by the dramatizations of tama pii\textsuperscript{22} such as Hulk Hogan, Andre the Giant, Roddy Piper, Jimmy Fly Snuka, and even our very own Wild Samoans.

\textsuperscript{19} KVZK-TV was also received by many residents in the neighboring independent Samoa over many decades. In fact, the Samoan government only just initiated their very own Televise Samoa in the earlier part of the 1990s. But before that, Samoans in both countries viewed the same television programming.

\textsuperscript{20} Evening devotional or prayer usually featured local church groups from all over American Samoa who would provide singing of hymns by a choir, a sermon or spiritual thought and a prayer offering by a pastor, minister or faifeau. The programmed time for Sauniga Lotu coincided with the time families would gather together to have evening prayer that would typically be held at dawn or sunset.

\textsuperscript{21} Pii is a verb as in to wrestle—to be engaged in the activity of wrestling, as a noun, is piiga.

\textsuperscript{22} Samoan for male wrestlers.
Each Sunday, Samoan families tuned in to find out who had the most clout and who could simply “back up” their talk with hair pulling, slapping and slamming of bodies and plain old physical violence. For the most part, Samoan audiences were enthralled with these staged wrestling matches where testosterone muscled men were willing to take care of their business inside the ring. It is interesting to note that Dwayne Johnson first started out as an entertainer/wrestler like his grandfather and black Canadian father, Rocky
Johnson. After establishing himself as a prolific wrestler within the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) circuit, Johnson’s reputation as a wrestler surpassed both his grandfather and father’s legacies. Within a few years, Johnson became the “people’s champion” as The Rock, (as he was affectionately known by the public) and possessed the charisma and appeal unlike any other wrestler. His cross-over from wrestling to acting in Hollywood was relatively easy. In many ways, Johnson epitomizes the ideal of the American self-made man in the fashion of someone who typically went from “rags to riches.” As he explains to People Magazine, his tatau reminds him of the struggles he has conquered as he has charted his way through his turbulent past. In essence, Johnson’s tatau is a symbolic reminder of his life-journey as a diasporic Samoan in the United States. While Johnson’s contemporary tatau differs from that of his grandfather’s more traditional tatau, Johnson’s own reference to his tatau as being “Samoan” sparks potential debate over what should be deemed as an authentic Samoan tatau. In fact, tatau enthusiasts will contend that Johnson’s tatau is more Marquesian or Tahitian than Samoan.

23Dwayne Johnson started off using the stage name Rocky Maivia—merging the names of both his grandfather and father—trying to capitalize on their successful careers within the wrestling industry. Both his grandfather and father were also wrestling partners at one point in time which is how Johnson’s mother Ata became acquainted with Rocky, his father. Much to the elder Maivia’s dismay, Ata and Rocky eloped and married. Dwayne dropped the stage name to take on “the Rock.”

24WWF has now evolved to become WWE which is World Wrestling Entertainment.
The discussion surrounding Dwayne Johnson and whether his tatau could be considered a valid expression of his cultural identity as a diasporic Samoan reminds me of my younger brother Toniuolevaiaavea Fonoti who played football for the University of Nebraska from 1999-2002. While he was there, Toniuolevaiaavea decided to get a tatau on his arm bearing the name of our beloved maternal grandmother, Fetogi, who had passed away in 1997. For my siblings and me, his tatau seemed to be a fitting tribute to
her memory—a visible yet permanent reminder inscribed upon his body. I assert that Dwayne Johnson’s tatau can be regarded the same way my siblings and I interpreted our brother’s tatau. For me, the tatau for which my brother Toniuolevaiavea and Dwayne Johnson have chosen to mark upon their bodies definitely embody elements of a tradition that they attribute to the memory of their Samoan grandparents. In both scenarios, the tradition of ta tatau conjures specific memories of love and respect which they strongly identify and attribute to the faasamoa and inadvertently expressed as “Samoan-ness.”

Papalii Dr Failautusi Avegalio’s observation of the tatau “as a dance that connects” is particularly appropriate; for young diasporic Samoans, the tradition of ta tatau is a ritual or tradition which links them directly to their ancestors. Consequently, the inherent need to identify with their forefathers associated with an autochthonous sense of “rootedness” is critical for younger diasporic Samoans as they attempt to locate themselves within the United States. In my mind, the tatau of Dwayne Johnson and my younger brother Toniuolevaiavea clearly illustrates the desire young diasporic Samoans may have to be linked with their forefathers. In a society like the United States, the tradition of ta tatau through the memory and nostalgia of their forefathers or ancestors allows them to assert an identity that is both unique and meaningful from other distinct groups or communities.
Chapter VI: Conclusion

"E o au o le Samoa, ou te le ma e tau atu!"

“Samoans take their names very seriously. It represents their families and the people that came before you. So if I don’t put forth the extra effort, I’m putting my name down. But if I’m putting in that extra effort on the field, I’m raising my name up.”

Toniu Fonoti

“Unlike some of my anthropological ancestors, I have no love affair or fascination with the bizarreness, strangeness or exoticness of other cultures, nor am I disenchanted, fed-up or disillusioned with my own Samoan culture. The purpose of my work, in looking at the identity of NZ-born Samoans, i.e., researching my own culture, is to continue the voyage of my Samoan ancestors across time and space, and to tell the story about the experiences of Samoan people across time and space.”

Melani Anae

I have discovered over the years that I am never comfortable introducing myself under certain circumstances. To assume that people will comprehend who I am and the places I have lived (with little explanation if any) is very unlikely. In fact, personal introductions usually end up being lengthy drawn out discussions about how I think or feel about the faasamo and the reasons that prompted much of the traveling my family and I have done as diasporic Samoans.

I am a New Zealand born Samoan because my parents met and married in Auckland when they had me. In the 1960s, both my parents had emigrated to New Zealand from Western Samoa to join family members who had already made their way over. In 1963, my mother joined her own mother while my father was reunited with his mother in 1964.

When I was 4 years old, my parents moved our family from Auckland to Oceanside, California where my mother’s father had been living. By the time I was 6, we had settled in Tafuna, American Samoa where we would be based until I was 12. But even then, my family continued to travel and visit family members who were scattered throughout Auckland, Wellington, Apia, Los Angeles and Oceanside. Then in 1985, my family moved to Apia where we would remain until 1990 before moving to Hawaii. And over the years, the traveling continued as other family members moved to other cities in places such as Nebraska, New Mexico, Minnesota, Texas, Florida, Utah, Arizona, Illinois and Vancouver. Given this pattern of movement, I have chosen to identify myself as a diasporic Samoan.

Esteemed travel writer Paul Theroux (whom I have cited in the preceding chapter in terms of what he says about the Boo Yaa T.R.I.B.E) has acknowledged in the Honolulu Advertiser that:

The most difficult place to write about is where you come from, where you live, the place you know best. It’s almost impossible to describe, because you know so much about it. You can’t just look at the surface, you’re looking at it through its history and through your personal memories . . . Most travelers are romantic voyeurs. We generalize, as people do in a new place, and that’s it. But when you’re living in the middle of it with all of these memories, the experience of writing about it is a challenge.3

In lieu of what he purportedly negates regarding Samoans and Pacific Islanders in Happy Isles of Oceania, I find Theroux’s confession amusing. As he describes the natural tendency of the romantic or casual traveler to “generalize” about a particular place there is much irony in his statement as he is describing the very process in which he establishes a lucrative and successful career. If we are to consider the implications of his work, I am

convinced that because Theroux has written about places he knows little about, he has not been held accountable for a lot of the material he has published. In my mind, a writer must be accountable for what he produces and Theroux is the classic case of someone who has been able to elude that responsibility—primarily because he is often dismissed or perhaps validated as a travel writer. As a Samoan reading Theroux’s musings about other Samoans in his infamous book *Happy Isles of Oceania*, I am simply appalled with his lack of compassion and empathy for Samoans or other Pacific Islanders for that matter. On the flip side of the coin and definitely to his credit, Theroux’s commentary is also insightful as I can clearly identify with the mental barrier he so aptly describes as one attempts to describe a place, culture or community to which one belongs. Writing about oneself is always an arduous task as many writers will attest.

However, New Zealand born Samoan, Melani Anae is introspective as she reflects upon the reasons she is in academia. As a native or indigenous anthropologist, Anae maintains that the purpose of her work “is to continue the voyage of my Samoan ancestors across time and space, and to tell the story about the experiences of Samoan people across time and space.” Anae recognizes the importance of articulating and documenting the various narratives of her ancestors. Samoan writer Albert Wendt is also reassuring as he calls upon indigenous writers and scholars to document their own histories. In a conference address Wendt delivers back in 1985 he implores:

I’m not arguing that outsiders should not write about us, but they must not pretend they can write from inside us. It is a matter of perspective and approach. . . . Our artists are borrowing Western art forms and materials and adapting them to explore their own visions and peoples. . . . in my work I explore the possibilities of Samoanness. Our Pacific novelists put us at center stage; they try to restore to us their dignity and self-respect. . . . in the final instance, one learns to research and write history by doing it.
The making of a historian or a novelist is a long and lonely process of self-creation; it is its own reward and most of us will die feeling unfulfilled.4

Taking cue from Anae and Wendt, how do I as a Samoan academic articulate my Samoan-ness and recognize or establish connections with other Samoans over time and space? While I am painfully aware that my own sense of Samoan-ness differs from that of other Samoans, Anae and Wendt remind me that I am the only one who can initiate the necessary groundwork to better articulate my own position-ing as a diasporic Samoan based in the United States.

In the “Worn with Pride” catalogue, Teri Sowell, cites “Identity” a poem by Tate Simi as she dedicates the exhibit to younger Samoans who made such an impression on her. As this simple but poignant poem is referenced, I am reminded of my first encounters with this text as a student back in Apia.

Educate yourself enough
so you may understand
the ways of other people
But not too much
That you may lose
Your understanding
Of your own

Try things palagi
Not so you may become palagi
But so you may see the value
Of things Samoan

Learn not to speak Samoan
Not so you may sound Samoan
But so you may
Feel the essence
Of being Samoan

Above all

Be aware and proud
Of what you are
So you may spare yourself the agony
Of those who are asking
What am I?  

As a student in Western Samoa, this poem sparked a sense of curiosity and adventure for what I was yet to experience as a student who would study abroad or overseas. My one aspiration back then was to leave Samoa—an impoverished third world country. I was reminded of this everywhere I turned: in the classroom with expatriate teachers and outdated textbooks, in the media through newspapers, radio and television, and in my own village where people continued to do things the way they did fifty to a hundred years ago such as laundering clothes along the river bank or cooking daily meals over an open fire. I knew deep down that I did not want that life and living abroad seemed the only option for me. But in leaving Samoa perhaps I have come full circle as I have tried things that are papalagi and now appreciate “the value of things Samoan.”

As a diasporic Samoan, I marvel at the numerous cross-roads I have encountered: prompting me to consider the insistent and persistent task of “code-switching” between Samoan-ness, American-ness, papalagi-ness and of course the local and global discourses as defined within diasporic communities I move in and out of. Yet in light of the “code-switching” that is involved as diasporic Samoans negotiate their cultural identities, I am convinced of how volatile and subjective identity or affiliation can be given one’s sense of position-ing.

On a more personal note, an isolated experience which illustrates this shifting sense of “location” or “place” was when I returned to live in Apia, Samoa from 1996—

1998. During that time, a young afa-kasi Samoan by the name of Aggie Sua Hewson had recorded an original upbeat song entitled “E o Au o le Samoa” which was extremely popular. In fact, Hewson’s song received continuous air-play on the two local radio stations at the time which were the government radio station 2AP and the privately owned Radio Magik FM Polynesia. However, the one thing that made Aggie Sua Hewson’s song popular amongst local Samoans was the actual chorus which went,

E o au o le Samoa
E o au o le Samoa
E o au o le Samoa
ou te le ma e tau atu
ou te le ma e tau atu!6

Even as Samoans in Samoa favored Hewson’s signature song “E o au o le Samoa” so did Samoans who were scattered throughout the diaspora thousands of miles away—in Auckland, Laie, Long Beach, and Salt Lake City as Hewson’s lyrics admonished Samoans to be proud of their Samoan-ness and not be ashamed to proclaim it. Any Samoan who listened to the song felt an immense surge of pride in being Samoan.

6 I am a Samoan and not ashamed to express or proclaim this.
Meanwhile back in Apia, on a balmy September evening in 1998, I recall feeling very insulted as I caught a live performance of the adolescent Hewston performing her signature song before hundreds of spectators in front of the Government Building. She was dressed in a white-feathered costume fashioned after a Tahitian dancer in a typical Polynesian revue somewhere in the heartland of an obscure American town or city. Surrounded by an ensemble of other Samoan dancers wearing grass skirts to off-set their pulsating body movements, I recall feeling an immense horror and shame as these
performers appropriated another island or cultural expression to express their mitamitaga or pride for their own brand of Samoan-ness. In my estimation, if Hewson was singing about Samoan-ness, why couldn’t authentic elements of traditional Samoan dress been incorporated in Hewson’s stage performance? On the other hand, was her stage performance any less authentic because she chose to use Tahitian dress? Why did it bother me that Hewson’s performance was not representative of what I would have deemed “authentically Samoan”? It finally dawned on me that maybe I was the one who was guilty of “generalizing” and “stereotyping.” In essence, I had no right to deem Hewson’s performance as inauthentic on the basis that she did not wear attire that I thought to be traditionally Samoan.

**Articulating Samoan-ness**

Samoan scholar, Unasa Leulu Felise Vaa of the National University of Samoa helps answers my questions in a *Samoa Observer* editorial as he articulates,

[How then should we define Samoan identity? . . . some people believe a Samoan, a real Samoan, is one who speaks the indigenous language and who practices the culture. According to this definition, a person who does not speak Samoan or practise the faa-Samoa is not a Samoan. But this is highly unfair because we have cousins, nieces and nephews who may not speak the Samoan language or live according to the values, beliefs and practices of Samoan culture. Some of our second and third generation relatives in Hawaii, the United States, New Zealand and Australia fall into this category. But, of course, we still call them Samoans despite those deficiencies. We may call them “papalagi” but this would be more in a joking manner. We continue to call them Samoan because of our blood connections. So this also means identity is more than just the ability to speak Samoan and live according to the fa’a Samoa.]

Vaa's discussion evokes a perplexing and disturbing series of questions; for years, I have reflected and considered what is entailed when one speaks of Samoan identity.

Literary critic Vincent Cheng in his book *Inauthentic: The Anxiety Over Culture and Identity* reiterates the now clichéd argument between native and non-native academics over what is seemingly authentic or traditional:

This quest for an authentic identity, in all its manifestations, also involves what to me is a truly disturbing implication—having to do with popular assumptions of what constitutes “culture” and “identity.” Is a cultural identity something fluid, messy, ongoing, always in process, always still being created? Or is it something identifiable as authentic and thus nameable, categorizable, frozen, essentialist, and rigid? Both the anxiety that one’s own identity may be inauthentic and the urge to fill such inauthenticity via a “heritage industry” or a “roots mania” are premised on the assumption of the invisibility or nonexistence of one’s own culture.  

Cheng also contends,

We seem to forget that our own lived and complex daily experiences, however they may elude authentic classification or nostalgic simplification, do constitute themselves into a very particular, real, and living culture that we are creating and shaping and transmitting to our children . . . Rather we tend to romanticize and idealize culture and community: we expect them to be monovocal, beautifully coherent, satisfying, harmonious, and static. What culture—in spite of all the tour guides and travel books—has ever really been that way? 

While Cheng raises a series of particularly poignant questions as he considers whether it is nonetheless instructive as I consider my initial reactions to isolated sites or expressions of cultural identity or Samoan-ness such as the performances of afa-kasi Aggie Sua Hewson in Apia, the Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E.’s “West Koasta Nostra,” or the Oceanside Museum of Art’s prominent exhibit “Worn with Pride.” In other words, is it fair of me as a diasporic Samoan to question whether these varied sites represent a specific sense or

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9 Cheng, *Inauthentic: The Anxiety over Culture and Identity*. 
notion of authenticity as it would pertain to Samoan-ness from the diaspora? I deliberately pose this question throughout this thesis to illustrate the validity of understanding just how complex and divergent culture is. In my estimation, the faasamo as it is represented, projected, interpreted and negotiated by Samoans and non-Samoans alike through specific modes or display of public performance is always shifting, changing and in-flux. When an individual may think she has comprehended an element or attribute pertaining to something as permeable as culture, it will never remain constant—to reiterate Stuart Hall’s assessment of culture, it is forever changing—taking on other guises or forms.

In conclusion, Samoan-ness as articulated by diasporic Samoans in the United States is an ongoing process. Like any process or work-in-progress, articulating any specific brand of Samoan-ness requires constant negotiation and flexibility. Yet even as diasporic Samoans in the United States endeavor to define Samoan-ness thousands of miles away from Samoa, their beloved homeland, the faasamo continues to shape the lives of many Samoans. I am of the opinion that as Samoans establish “roots” in towns and cities across the American landscape, Samoan-ness is embodied through specific performative notions as manifested through the traditional Samoan art-form of ta tatau. As diasporic Samoans in the United States continue to validate pride in their Samoan cultural heritage, a consciousness of Samoan-ness becomes more and more apparent.
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