

Book and Media Reviews

The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 27, Number 1, 295-317
© 2015 by University of Hawai'i Press

epilogue of Webber engravings), the exhibition testifies to the rapid, intense impact of Christian missions on traditional Polynesian culture. From the first decades of the nineteenth century, missionaries' strategic conversion of the most powerful chiefs led to wholesale destruction of thousands of atua and their marae; as Gunn notes in his catalog introduction, "All the images of Rongo and Tane were destroyed, three or four images of Tangaroa have survived as shapeless pieces of whalebone or wood, and perhaps two or three images of Tu remain." This almost universal Pacific iconoclasm was an artistic and perhaps socio-cultural tragedy; the relatively few survivals are accordingly precious and warrant close attention.

Atua is a moving testament, both to the rich material culture of Polynesia in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and to the catastrophic effects of Western imperialism. It is an important reminder to its Australian audiences that the Islands of the Pacific Ocean loom large in the map of the Australian imagination: from the voyages of Captain Cook to Samuel Marsden's missionary and trading engagements with New Zealand; from colonial participation in the Māori Wars to national leadership of the RAMSI peacekeeping mission in the Solomons; from Bernard Smith's *European Vision and the South Pacific* to Greg Denning's *Beach Crossings*. It is also an aesthetically demanding, intellectually challenging museum experience.

DAVID HANSEN
Sotheby's Australia, Melbourne

* * *

Tonga: The Last Place on Earth.

Documentary film, 57 minutes, color, 2013. Written and directed by Phil Travis; produced by The Mission, inc; distributed by Pacific Islanders in Communications, Honolulu. Available at <http://vimeo.com/ondemand/lastplace/76883759>. Rental, US\$3.99.

Against the backdrop of increasingly fraught relationships between US immigration and criminal justice policies as experienced by Pacific Islanders, including Tongans living in the United States, Pacific Islanders in Communication and PBS Hawaii bring us a disturbingly shallow and distorted documentary of Tongan gangs and US deportation called *Tonga: The Last Place on Earth*. Produced and broadcast as part of the second season of *Pacific Heartbeat*, a series that promises a "glimpse of the real Pacific," what *Tonga: The Last Place* actually does is perpetuate the same racialized animus that has enabled the United States' media and juridical and regulatory systems to stigmatize a generation of immigrants as dangerously criminal.

While the producers and director of this film deserve credit for attempting to present the experiences of diasporic Tongans, and perhaps other Pacific Islanders, with the US criminal justice system in the context of broader American politics of immigration and citizenship, this program well demonstrates why sensitivity to historical, social, and cultural contexts is absolutely critical for clear, balanced dialogue and documentary reporting. *Tonga: The Last Place on Earth* joins other contemporary television representations like the series *Jonah from*

Tonga in Australia to frame Pacific Islander (and, specifically Tongan) young men as pathologically violent. In these contexts, such framings foster transnational moral panics that justify discrimination and unjust treatment of Tongans in diaspora including the criminalization and deportation of an unprecedented number of immigrants. If nothing else, this documentary reminds us that Pacific studies should be attentive to an important genre of broadly circulating media—popular television programming. While *Pacific Islanders in Communication* and PBS Hawaii should be lauded for much good work and for circulating stories about the contemporary Pacific, popular journalism runs the risk of being spectacular and damaging to Pacific Islander communities in diaspora and in homelands.

Written and directed by Phil Travis, *Tonga: The Last Place on Earth* is produced by The Mission, inc, a television and film production company whose body of work runs from reality TV to feature-length thrillers. The opening suggests a gaze both unfamiliar with and insensitive to Tongan social and cultural contexts, making it indistinguishable from a number of touristic videos. With this exoticizing gaze, the montage cuts in images of a failed paradise. A close-up of red hibiscus stands in for a culturally authentic past, virginal and amenable to feminization, in contrast with rusty abandoned vehicles and half-naked children. Such stock images reveal a stance that has no grasp of Tonga as a real place. This representational nullity is only worsened when a patronizing and omniscient voice-over begins a heavy expository “whitesplaining”

of US deportation in terms of ethnic criminality, opting to omit any reference to the juridical or policy background that underpins contemporary deportation.

The core of the program includes a series of seemingly haphazardly gathered interview snippets. A handful of deported immigrants in Tonga, including one woman, are lined up in the filmic equivalent of a “perp walk,” a shaming spectacle with deep Euro-American roots. The interviewees are apparently asked questions exclusively about their convictions. Viewers never learn what questions were used because the film completely edits out the presence of any interviewer. There is absolutely no context to discern how these stories were extracted—a troubling fact in itself, considering the ethical and human rights issues of displaced persons. These forced (and in some cases literally captive) interviews are contrasted with stiff statements from disciplinary agents of the state in Salt Lake City, who gloss over contexts in an attempt to establish that Tongans are deported for “gang violence, murder, and other serious crimes.” These interviewees include detectives from the Salt Lake Gang Task Force, a Polynesian social worker, and an African-American immigration attorney. Meanwhile, diasporic voices, such as those in a tearful interview with the mother and sister of a deported man, are juxtaposed with a rather staged lineup representing Tonga’s officialdom, including a member of the royal family, a well-known journalist, and a rather fiery parliamentarian. Their stories do not all add up, either. The Tongan moral guardians each claim

there is no problem with returning native sons, yet, despite this evidence, the film refuses to relinquish its assertion that these few hundred deported individuals are somehow transforming Tonga with their inherent, “hardened” criminality.

Finally, the film treads close to the genre of yellow journalism with a series of cringe-worthy crime reenactments reminiscent of sensational crime TV. While there are too many troubling scenes to sort out in a short review, a “ride-along” scenario with the Salt Lake Gang Task Force scoping out the streets for Tongan gang members is reminiscent of a safari and is particularly troubling in its predatory callousness, especially in the wake of recent tragedies such as the death of twenty-five-year-old Siale Angilau, who in April 2014, after charging a witness with a pen, was shot eight times by a US marshal in a federal courthouse. (Angilau and sixteen other members of the Tongan Crip Gang were on trial a second time in federal court for crimes they had already been convicted of at the state level, under the controversial use of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations [RICO] Act, legislation originally meant to address Mafia-style crime and now being applied to street gangs.)

It is troubling that, given its subject of deportation, the film fails to make any reference to the massive changes to US deportation policies since 1997 specifically or the post-9/11 “Secure Communities” program administered by the Department of Homeland Security, which have created the possibility of mass deportation of over four million legal permanent residents and

undocumented workers alike, including Tongans and other Pacific Islanders. While the US context of immigration would have better contextualized some of the production’s subterranean currents, it is even more problematic that the film fails to contextualize the reality of contemporary Tongan experiences and lifeways. Indeed, I suppose that this is the film’s basic premise—Tonga is “the last place on earth,” a heterotopic other space, a non-space that even “criminals” would find empty and worthless and would readily leave for better opportunities abroad.

PBS Hawaii has a core value of aloha kekahi i kekahi (respect the dignity of others). *Tonga: The Last Place on Earth* falls short of this value. When we watch documentaries produced by Pacific Islanders in Communications and PBS Hawaii, we expect ethical reflections, not impoverished distortions of the Pacific made by television filmmakers who maintain no ties or reciprocal obligations to the communities they plunder. It would be something to look forward to if the producers used *Pacific Heartbeat* to foster filmmaking in indigenous communities to tell our own stories rather than rely on parachute filmmakers who contribute to transnational moral panics.

LEA LANI KAUVAKA

The University of the South Pacific

* * *