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 sociocultural 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 Dening’s Beach Crossings. It is also an aesthetically demanding, intellectually challenging museum experience.

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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 televisual representations like the series Jonah from
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 amenably feminized, 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 asser-
tion 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 sensa-
tional 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 Secu-

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 documenta-
ries produced by Pacific Islanders in
Communications and PBS Hawaii, we
expect ethical reflections, not impov-
erished 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 com-

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