Wild felt familiar. I had experienced the same feelings in countless other mainstream movies. In The Pā Boys, however, my emotional responses emanated from the deep recesses of my being, which very few films have been able to touch. Rotumans call this place huga, which literally translates as “inside of the body, esp. of the abdomen”; Hawaiians call it the na‘au while Māori call it the ngakau.

It is in one’s gut that the truth of the ages resides. This kind of knowing cannot be explained logically or rationally. It is a knowing that is activated when one experiences a universal truth, which in The Pā Boys, is this: For these Māori young people to be truly healed, they needed to reconnect with and learn about their ancestral pasts in order to become more humane, more compassionate, better human beings. This is the universal message, told not through a sermon but through a musical story about boys and their girlfriends, going away together on what they thought would be a fun journey but instead became a transformational one for all concerned.

Himiona Grace and his producers, cast, and crew have made a film whose truth is as old as the mountains, as vast as the sky, and as deep as the Pacific Ocean. This is a film that deserves our respect not only because of its inherent wisdoms (and there are several) but also because it is fearlessly culturally specific.

In most films made by indigenous filmmakers thus far, nuance and specificity are often compromised to cater to the tastes of a global and mainstream audience. Not so with The Pā Boys. The result is an extraordinary film, disguised as an ordinary road movie. As such, it is a film that is easy to overlook, even at film festivals where it might be possible to discover a fearlessly independent voice.

When you accidentally stumble on an authentic voice, like I did, you know you’ve finally experienced the film you have always hoped to see when you go to the movies but thought the day would never come! This was how it was with me.

VILSONI HERENIKO
University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa

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The television series Jonah From Tonga was released to low ratings and accusations of racism. Originally presented in Australia, where it was produced, it later premiered on HBO in the United States. It features Australian comedian and show-runner Chris Lilley, who is white, as Jonah Takalua, a fourteen-year old Tongan high school student. Lilley’s use of makeup and a limp frizzy wig—what might charitably be called “Polynesian face”—are easy targets for criticism, if not outright dismissal, of the apparent minstrelsy that at first glance seems to characterize the six-episode series. And if one looked no further than the phenotype of the main character, certainly this show would not be
worthy of discussion. However, for those who sit through all three hours of the show, a much more complex and uncomfortably important genotype emerges, one that forces viewers to contend with issues that go beyond superficial representations of Islanders in the contemporary media landscape.

It is necessary to situate Jonah within the cosmology of actor and creator Chris Lilley so that one who is not familiar does not get the impression that this character, or Lilley’s portrayal of him, is an isolated incident or occurring in a vacuum. Jonah first appeared as one of three characters played by Lilley in his 2007 series *Summer Heights High*. That show, filmed in the now ubiquitous mockumentary style first popularized by the British version of *The Office*, followed Mr G, a drama teacher; Ja’mie King, an over-privileged private school student spending a year on exchange at public school; and Jonah. The series spawned two spin-offs, *Ja’mie: Private School Girl*, featuring Lilley dressed as the title character in drag, and *Jonah From Tonga*. It is interesting to note that Lilley’s portrayal of Jonah in *Summer Heights High* did not engender the same type of critical reaction that this latest series has, despite Lilley’s consistency between the two series.

At the end of *Summer Heights High*, Jonah is expelled from the school and sent to Tonga to live with his uncle. That is where the story in *Jonah From Tonga* begins, and, from the get-go, it is apparent that Jonah has learned little from his expulsion, nor has he become a particularly sympathetic character. His flaws are many and manifest themselves at every possible opportunity: he swears; he is homophobic; he punches male relatives in the genitals; he has a penchant for graffiti that ostensibly spells out the words “dictation” by drawing a crude facsimile of male genitalia followed by the letters “tation” (he even tags the side of a pig) and “pussycat” (I will let readers use their imagination); he tries unsuccessfully to date his cousin; and he is prone to bullying others. But unlike Mr G and Ja’mie, who are so self-centered that they are clearly archetypes of parody, Jonah is slightly more self-aware and therefore is potentially redeemable. One of the underlying currents in the series is whether Jonah will actually redeem himself. What is surprising is that, in his way, he does.

A number of plot points woven through the episodes allow Lilley to highlight, and then puncture, particular tropes about Islanders, race, migration, masculinity, and schooling. Jonah overstays his welcome with his uncle, and, early in the first episode, his father, Aunty Grace, and younger brother Moses come to bring him back to Australia. There he attends Holy Cross, and he picks up where he left off at *Summer Heights High*. He leads a crew calling themselves “Fobba-liscious” and who spend their days bullying the redheaded students (called “rangers,” slang for “orang-utan”) and dreaming of hip-hop stardom. The engagement with diaspora and racism is both subtle and over the top, as when Jonah takes on Graydon, an older student and “ranger” who offers Jonah no quarter. After Jonah melts Graydon’s locker with an acetylene blowtorch, they are both dressed down by Mr Joseph, a voca-
tional education teacher, who employs a vocabulary that consists almost entirely of curses. Also at the meeting is Kool Kris, a youth worker at Holy Cross who is Tongan—and is played by a Tongan actor, as are all the Tongan characters except for Jonah. A typical exchange then occurs, in which Graydon tells Jonah, “Shut up, Fob. At least I can read books,” and Mr Joseph replies, “Hey, that’s enough of the racist thing, Mate. You’ve got a Fob youth worker standing right beside you.” It is this inability of a figure like Mr Joseph to see his own dissimulation in this scene that makes it so effective: it exposes the racism at work among white Australians and Islander migrants while forcing the audience to decide whether or not they should laugh at it.

Indeed, the target here seems to be the complexity of this awkward space. Jonah, as the series title tells us, is from Tonga, but it is clear that he is not of Tonga. He does not speak the language, apart from the lyrics of a few songs, and he has no overt interest in Tonga aside from his Takalua family tattoo, which is unfinished. He seems more at ease in Australia, despite the hardships and challenges he faces there. Yet issues of fidelity to family, and notably Jonah’s relationship with his brother Moses, demonstrate a nuanced practicing of customary mores that viewers unfamiliar with Pacific Islander cultures may miss. Jonah is highly protective of Moses, and his loyalty to being a Takalua manifests itself in the “Takalua link,” wherein Jonah and Moses link arms, claiming inseparability. When both boys wind up in the Garingal Juvenile Justice Centre after attempting to rob a bowling alley with a “real” Tongan machete given to them by George, leader of the Tongan Soldierz gang, they attempt to link up while they are taken to separate rooms; the heartbreak of that literal separation and breaking of the family bond makes the scene almost too difficult to watch.

Issues of Pacific Islander masculinity also come to the fore as Jonah is exposed to, and ultimately rejects, a variety of male Tongan role models: these include Kool Kris, a devout Catholic and declared virgin, as well as an accomplished dancer, whom Jonah therefore tries to dismiss as “gay” despite the fact that Kool Kris believes in Jonah and sticks with him through to the end; George, the gang leader, who ultimately winds up dating the cousin Jonah publicly covets; and Jonah’s father, Rocky Takalua, who in every scene with Jonah winds up threatening violence. While in juvenile detention awaiting a parole hearing, Jonah remarks, “If I’m good and responsible and stay out of trouble when I get out, my dad said he’s going to take me to Tonga to get my Takalua tattoo finished, which means I’m a real man.” I will not spoil the ending by describing the Takalua tattoo, which is revealed at the end of the series, back in Tonga.

Perhaps the most touching scenes involve those in which Jonah sings Tongan church songs with his family, with Moses, and with his classmates. On Jonah’s return to Holy Cross from juvenile detention, he learns that Mr Joseph has been fired and the vocational and special education
program eliminated. Jonah and the Fobba-liscious crew sing “Ofaange ‘a e ‘Otua e” (the Tongan version of the hymn “God Be with You Till We Meet Again) to Mr Joseph as a farewell. For a brief moment, it is a wonderful insight into one aspect of Tongan culture and the importance of arrivals and departures as part of relationships in Pacific society, and the boys’ voices are beautiful. Then Jonah hits Mr Joseph in the genitals.

There is much more here to generate fruitful discussion in the context of Pacific studies, and there is much here still to criticize. Far from perfect, Lilley could certainly have toned down his physical representation of Jonah, and the use of a tiki in the title credits as well to signify scene changes is not necessary to get his point across. But this is not D W Griffith’s Birth of a Nation; rather, if one takes a closer look, Jonah From Tonga, while flawed, is well worth the conversation about a multiplicity of issues Islanders encounter that Lilley is so obviously provoking. An argument might be made that Lilley is employing the Pacific custom of clowning and using unbearable examples of humor in order to force us to face the status quo and see it for all its absurdity. Let us hope that that is in fact the case.

DAVID W KUPFERMAN
University of Hawai‘i–West O‘ahu

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For many years, disciplinary boundaries have hindered the production of major analytic works on Japan’s Pacific empire, particularly in Micronesia. As Robert Tierney notes in the introduction to Tropics of Savagery, postcolonial theory tends to be relentlessly focused on Europe and its colonies, and the tendency of many universities to relegate scholars of Japan to area studies programs only exacerbates the problem. Even within Japanese Empire studies, the politically anomalous position of Micronesia within a League of Nations Mandate and its relatively smaller population have caused it to be neglected in favor of other, more visible colonies. Micronesia scholars like Wakako Higuchi, Keith Camacho, and Greg Dvorak have made important contributions to the growing body of scholarship on the region’s Japanese occupation, but sustained engagement between Pacific studies and East Asian studies remains rare.

Tropics of Savagery and Nanyo-Orientalism are ambitious, theo-