

**THE NOT SO PACIFIC: PACIFIC ISLANDER FILMS AT
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“F--k Margaret Mead,” said the Samoan gang member living in Los Angeles, “Long Beach: that’s where you want to go if you want to make a movie.”¹ While his was a pointed claim about the diasporic dimensions of Pacific Islander lives, it also signals a respatialized cultural geography for the meaningful contexts in which cultural identities are forged today. Pacific Islanders’ struggles to assert and locate cultural identity, struggles that take place in a variety of culturally and spatially diverse contexts and that involve struggles against colonialism, neocolonialism, and the logics of racism that help authorize the two, connect most of the half-dozen films showcased in the three “Pacific Island Cultures” sessions held at the November 1996 Margaret Mead Film & Video Festival at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Despite the gang member’s pithy advice to Margaret Mead, then, the films and videos shown in New York’s annual visual homage to her more closely reflect this gang member’s reconfiguration of the meaningful sites and expanded terms of cultural identity than the more bounded and isomorphic views of Margaret Mead.

In this essay I review several of the Pacific Islander films shown at the festival, including the one in which the gang member’s words were memorialized, *My Crasy Life* (1992, United States and Samoa). The other Pacific Islands films screened include *Baba Kiueria* (1986, Australia), *Colonists for a Day* (1995, Papua New Guinea), *Islands on the Edge of Time* (1995, Palau), *Mask Dance (Singsing Tumbuan)* (1995, Papua New Guinea; not reviewed), and *Then There Were None* (1995, Hawai‘i).

Baba Kiueria

Each year the Margaret Mead Festival highlights a particular theme, and in 1996 that was “Fake Documentary.” In this genre of filmmaking the con-

ventions of traditional documentary are used to call into question, and subvert, what constitutes “truth” in telling stories about people’s lives. Oftentimes humorous, pointed, and political, these films can reveal and untangle the absurdities embedded in some of our most naturalized assumptions and conventions. *Baba Kiueria*, a film made in 1986 by the Aboriginal Programs Unit in Australia, uses satire to protest the white-washed meanings of the Australian Bicentenary and exemplifies the power of fake documentary and humor as media for social critique (cf. Ginsburg 1995).

The film gains its title in the opening scene. On a serene lakeshore, white, middle-class family is having a picnic: father barbecuing, mother setting the picnic table, children of various ages running around playing. From across the lake a small motorboat approaches, bearing a half-dozen uniformed men. The family, appearing concerned, gathers together on the shore to watch the boat’s arrival. The boat docks and several Aboriginal men in military regalia approach the family, ceremonially carrying the Aboriginal movement’s flag. In a send-up of the primal moment of the colonial encounter, one of the officers plants the flag and another, directing his words to the father, slowly asks, ‘What . . . do . . . you . . . call . . . this . . . place?’ The father looks around at his family and the area, a puzzled expression on his face. Turning back to the officer, he shrugs his shoulders: “It’s a barbecue area,” the father says. The Aboriginal officer nods: “Ah,” he says approvingly, “Baba Kiueria--I like that.”

Thus is the Aboriginal colony of Baba Kiueria named. The film reverses the categories of colonizer and colonized in Australia: in *Baba Kiueria*, it is Aboriginals who are the colonists and Whites who are colonized. Through reversing these terms, the film makes numerous critical interventions into discourses of primitivism, racism, cultural superiority, “development,” and modernity. Viewers are guided through the film by an Aboriginal investigative reporter, who tells us she spent six months living with “a typical White family in a typical White ghetto.” Voyeuristic scenes in the home of these ethnographic subjects have the reporter addressing to viewers her motivating questions (‘What holds White society together?’) and findings (“They are so different from the [media] images of Whites”), as family members move awkwardly in the background or respond in bitten-off words to the reporter’s sudden questions about their status in this society: ‘We’re very happy. . . there’s no problems.” Cultural exoticization comes under critique in one memorable breakfast-table scene, where the lingering gaze of the camera makes a prominently displayed box of corn flakes into an indigenous cultural artifact: this is White culture.

On her quest to understand Whites’ inability to succeed in this colonial society, the reporter locates Aboriginals as the source of wisdom about the

colonized Whites, simultaneously calling attention to the pervasiveness of this practice in documentary productions. The reporter questions various professionals on what they think of Whites, including the minister of White Affairs, who generously responds, "They're a developing people, starting to take an interest in the world around them." Addressing the "problem" of White assimilation, a police inspector tells the reporter it would help if Whites would "smile a bit." Stereotypes from the mouths of Aboriginals are put to exquisite parodic use throughout the film: Whites are lazy because they would rather lie around in the sun at a swimming pool than work in a factory; White people's love of soccer confirms their natural affinity for violence; the annual Veterans' Day Parade is a ritual microcosm celebrating the foundations of White society--death and sacrifice. a

Not only are the roles of colonizer and colonized reversed, but so too are the valences of the stereotyped cultural values of each. As the camera pans a busy eight-lane highway, the reporter tells us that the government has plans for "this barren wasteland." A bush scene of dry land and sparse trees replaces the highway at the reporter's announcement of the plans: to make "a useful park." When White protest groups claim that this plan will "interrupt important trade routes," the minister of White Affairs responds that White attempts to cast the plan as "a land rights issue" are "the actions of a minority." Examining cultural values, the reporter explains how White children go to school to learn "the ways of their people": in a classroom a child stands facing a chalkboard, putting the final touches on his drawing of a nuclear bomb exploding into a mushroom cloud. a

The conventional questions and frameworks found in media and ethnographic representations of Aboriginals gain the full force of absurdity through the film's reversal of who occupies dominant and subordinate positions: who speaks and who is spoken about, who is subject and who is object. "Is it fair to try to develop White people?" the reporter asks: "What shall we do about the problem of White people? Should we change or should they?" Exploring these questions throws racism into a particularly stark light: "Are White people intelligent? Tests say yes; the problem is in their insularity." The dexterity and poignancy of the parody that constitutes *Baba Kiueria* creates a most effective and dangerously revealing critique of the naturalized cultural exoticization and racism that structure representations of Aboriginal people.

Colonists for a Day

In contrast to the parodic social documentary of *Baba Kiueria* is the classically conventional social documentary film, *Colonists for a Day*. The filmic

strategies of authoritative voice-over, archival film footage and photographs, interviews, and naturalistic shots of pristine mountains and misty valleys combine to tell a particular version of the story of Australia's brief trusteeship over New Guinea. This apologia for Australian colonialism is an interesting visual document in the emerging field of the anthropology of colonialism; unfortunately, the film was not designed to contribute to that field, making viewers responsible both for recontextualizing the film and for reinterpreting the footage.

The story line depicts Australians as eminently obliging in their response to the United Nations' foisting on them of this trusteeship--in the 1940s a periodization that effectively erases the region's status as an Australian Mandate in the years following World War I. Although Australia's trusteeship is critiqued within the film, it comes under scrutiny primarily from the perspectives of the "*kiaps*," Australian men who did the legwork of "pacifying" New Guinea. The film focuses on former *kiaps*, who are interviewed in the domestic settings of their homes and who are cast, both in their self-representations and in the supporting scenes and narratives included by filmmaker Alec Morgan, as good-hearted chaps driven by their desires to bring "civilization" to the savages: "They learned how to garden, the rudiments of hygiene, how to defecate in a toilet," one ex-*kiap* says, elaborating on what *kiaps* taught to Melanesians. The master narrative of the film, then, casts the *kiaps* as misunderstood do-gooders: "[We] were trying to create a Black Australia . . . the institutions . . . values [were Australian]," an ex-*kiap* explains.

The film's narrative and visual focus on the *kiaps* was likely meant to be balanced by the interspersed footage from recent interviews with Melanesians, who comment on their historical experiences with and understandings of the *kiaps*: "We didn't know if they were human or not," a Melanesian man recalls of the first time he saw one. While the Melanesians interviewed are always named, the interviews take place in villages that are never located: individuals' links to and memberships in specific cultural groups receive no mention. This sidelining of the cultural and regional specificity of these Melanesians and, relatedly, of the cultural diversity of Papua New Guinea, reinforces the *kiaps*' cultural geography of the region: New Guinea consists, for them, of coastal areas that are safe and the "wild interior" that needed pacifying. Thus is the cultural space of Papua New Guinea consistently mapped in colonial terms, even in this 1995 production.

What is perhaps most valuable about the film, however, is the poignant contortions and confessions of the former *kiaps* when these are reinterpreted as indigenous ethnography: this is the anthropology of colonialism, with the colonists speaking about themselves. As an indigenous colonial pro-

duction, *Colonists for a Day* becomes a text revealing of the conflicting agendas of colonial agents and the multiple frameworks through which they make sense of their colonial projects. Throughout the film, former *kiaps* reflect on their years in New Guinea: what they thought they were doing, what Australia was trying to accomplish, what they now believe Melanesians thought of them, what they now think Australia accomplished. As the *kiaps* look back on their years in and prior plans for New Guinea, they exude a profound nostalgia for their own good intentions and for the interrelated promise of their civilizing and modernizing mission. At the same time, their nostalgia grates harshly against their retrospective recognitions of the paternalism and moral questionability of the colonial project in which they participated.

Islands on the Edge of Time

Islands on the Edge of Time and *Then There Were None* are both filmic political interventions into the problems spawned by neocolonialism and colonialism in Palau and Hawai'i, respectively. The insights of these films, and of *Islands on the Edge of Time* in particular, constitute a much-needed visual media resource for introducing the knotted problems facing many Pacific societies today: the continuing struggles of indigenous peoples for independence from political trustees and/or colonial powers; the pitched conflicts over Euro-American strategic and military bases and interests in the Pacific; the meanings of political sovereignty in an age of multinational corporations, mobile capital, and foreign aid dependency; the growing problems of environmental degradation; and the possibilities for sustainable development.

Islands on the Edge of Time ranges broadly in its exploration of Palauan society today, and provides a useful introduction to the politics of Palauan political autonomy and economic dependency, in part through its treatment of the recent history of the Compact of Free Association between Palau and the United States. While the film makes clear the U.S. government's relentless interventions into Palauan democratic processes to further its own interests in the compact, the details of the struggle over the compact and their complex refractions through local interests are not wholly amenable to such a filmic summary; ethnographies like Lynn Wilson's *Speaking to Power* (1995) are useful and perhaps necessary supplements to this film, both for comprehending the intricacies of the compact and for contextualizing many of the cultural practices and values briefly introduced (and sometimes misrepresented) in this film. *Islands on the Edge of Time* won an award for its treatment of environmental issues, however, and one of the strong points of

the film is its educational approach to the value of preserving ecosystems and reconfiguring what counts as “development” so that it is both sustainable and congruent with local needs. The differences between short-term development and sustainable development are complexly treated in the film, making evident their links to political autonomy, to the need to redefine “economic need,” and to local cultural values. One schoolteacher interviewed in the film, for example, advised caution in the project of developing tourism in Palau; otherwise, she said, “like Hawaiians, our culture will become just another showcase . . . a museum.”

Then There Were None

The analogy to Hawai‘i provides a segue to *Then There Were None*. Perhaps the most personal film reviewed here, *Then There Were None* tells a particular history of Hawai‘i through the first-person narrative and partial autobiography of its part-Hawaiian filmmaker, Elizabeth Kapu‘uwailani Lindsey. Using a range of media-- archival photographs, promotional films from earlier in this century, family photographs, footage of recent Hawaiian land rights and sovereignty actions--the film begins with Captain Cooks eighteenth-century arrival in the islands, takes viewers up to the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy by American business interests a century later, and treats the intensive commercialization of the islands over the course of the twentieth century. The filmmaker’s own family biography moves to the center of the film in the commercial frenzy of the 1950s: “Selling Hawai‘i has never been easier!” exclaims an ad man in one promotional film. Lindsey eloquently describes the pain and irony of having Hawaiian *aloha* turned into a marketing device while Hawaiians themselves were increasingly forced to live on the most marginal of lands and progressively decimated by the disease and anomie introduced to the islands by the once-welcomed foreigners. Lindsey’s autobiographical segments are similarly rich in understated irony and poignancy as, for example, when she foreshadows her later reign as Miss Hawai‘i and unsuccessful bid to become Miss America through a reference to an adolescence she and her friends spent trying to look like the models in *Seventeen Magazine* --and never succeeding. In its final section, *Then There Were None* focuses on Hawaiian challenges to American values and rule by highlighting protests organized by Hawaiians, including the land rights encampments at Makapu‘u and *Waimānalo* in the 1980s. Footage from the 17 January 1993 march on ‘Iolani Palace, a somber commemoration of the overthrow of Hawaiian Queen Lili‘uokalani a hundred years before, closes the film, accompanied by Lindsey’s narrative of promise: “We are and will always be an unvanquished people.”

Throughout *Then There Were None*, however, the effects on Hawaiians of the increasingly intrusive moves by American and other colonial powers are calibrated to stark white-lettered statistical summaries that appear on the periodically blacked-out screen. These statistical summaries enumerate the numbers of “pure Hawaiians” left in a particular year--“1821--210,000 pure Hawaiians”; “1922---22,000 pure Hawaiians”--and appear regularly throughout the film as it moves chronologically through Hawai‘i’s colonial history. Following Lindsey’s hopeful closing note, we learn that by the year 2044 demographers predict there will not be one “pure Hawaiian” left. While these stark statistics constitute a powerful visual device for translating the effects of colonialism into real lives--and deaths--there is also something disturbing about the film’s repeated references to and reliance on the concept of “pure Hawaiians.” Here, instead of focusing on blood-quantum politics, a site of contention among many Hawaiian activists as well, I want to draw attention to the ways the privileging of blood as sign of cultural purity reasserts a problematic modernist romanticism, one that troubles both *Then There Were None* and the Palauan film *Islands on the Edge of Time*.

In *Then There Were None* blood purity stands in for a cultural authenticity in decline, in such a way as to reproduce the modernist yearning for “pure” peoples “uncontaminated” by modernity. In an analogous vein, *Islands on the Edge of Time* bends dangerously close to compromising its astute political analysis by clinging to a similarly modernist yearning for the kind of timeless islands referenced in the film’s title: a romantic primitivism evoking a dehistoricized and isolated people who are only now being trampled by the corruptions of an imperialistic modernity. In *Islands on the Edge of Time*, this modernist yearning enables some rather serious misrepresentations of Palauan society: Palauan social organization, for example, is depicted as egalitarian (“no one is better than anyone else here”), in sharp contrast to ethnographic studies that describe a society organized in ranked matriclans, whose corresponding etiquettes of respect behavior are prerequisite for social competence, and whose ranked order provides a vital cultural context for understanding local political conflicts, including the politics of the compact (see Wilson 1995).

My Crasy Life

My Crasy Life indirectly returns us to the 1996 Mead festival theme of fake documentary. More akin to ethno-fiction, the film is a scripted production, according to filmmaker Jean-Pierre Gorin; it is the product of collaboration between Gorin and the Sons of Samoa gang members who live in Long Beach, a part of Los Angeles, and are affiliated with the Crips, of Crips/Bloods infamy.

The film centers, at one level, on the foundational importance of gang life to the youths in the film. The film's title memorializes the extent to which everything in the film is filtered through gang life by spelling "crazy" with an *s*, not a *z*: this is "Gangster's spelling, not Webster's," Gorin states. Thus the film explores the violence of gang life, the rewards, costs, and meanings of gang membership. A relaxed daytime scene, for example, has many of the gang members sitting around the living room of someone's house. The camera focuses on one seated young man who is meticulously ironing a pair of slacks and, later, a signature blue Crips bandanna ("the flag of justice"). As if choreographed, the youths slow and steady ironing is punctuated by his periodic reaches down under his ironing table into a duffel bag: he withdraws a gun, cocks and uncocks it, smoothly passes it along to the gang member to his right, then returns to his ironing. The youth to whom he has passed the gun repeats the cocking ritual and, in turn, passes the gun along to another gang member. The first young man continues his slow and steady ironing, then reaches down for another gun, later yet another. Like familiar lovers, domesticity and warfare here dance in unspeakably comfortable intimacy.

At another level, *My Crasy Life* is about the Samoan diaspora in Los Angeles: how young Samoan men in the Sons of Samoa negotiate and signify the meanings of being Samoan relative to the other identities in which they invest in this non-Samoa location. This level is not, of course, separable from the specifics of gang life. In one film sequence, for example, gang members step in front of the camera and offer definitions for terms called out by someone behind the camera: "tat" is rendered "tattoo"; "shew," a gang member explains, means getting high off embalming fluid; given the word "Crip," one Samoan youth laughs and says it means "a nigger like me." This last youth's use of "nigger" as a term of self-description icon&es the complex identities these young men forge as they locate themselves in reference to Samoa ("Sons of Samoa" is, after all, the gang name) and to Los Angeles gang life of the early 1990s.

Nostalgia for Samoa and the search for meanings for Samoa are strongest in the second half of the film, which includes a journey by one gang member to American Samoa and interviews with two gang members who relocate to Honolulu, which has a large Samoan community. A group interview in which the young men reminisce about the stories they used to hear about "back in Samoa" juxtaposes their current lack of knowledge about Samoa with their desires to know more, with their nostalgia for the stories they used to hear: they are exuberant and proud as they sift through their memories for traces of Samoa and share recollections of growing up in a more Samoa-cognizant social context. The youth reminisce about going to church when they were children, for example, remembering how the church "kept

us in contact with Samoans.” “But now,” one young man says, “it’s like a piece is taken out: no one knows what’s going on back there now. . . I miss hearing about Samoa.” Several of the youth speak of their desires to learn the Samoan language. One comments on his lack of knowledge “about the deep stuff. . . when my parents talked, that’s when a big respect come.”

Kinship is one of the more interesting sites of contradiction for these youth. The gang members consistently juxtapose “my homeys” to their “immediate family,” yet references to the practice of “just being family” abound in the youths’ everyday speech--and there the referent is the gang, not one’s kin. In one especially compelling scene, a gang member cries as he talks about his love for his mother, describing how she cared for him while he was in jail: “she went through mountains to send me packages, worked overtime to send me money. . . she did a helluva lot for me,” he says. The youth contrasts his mother’s care during his jailing to that of his “homeys,” who, he says, never even sent him letters. Yet at the end of this homage to his mother, when he is asked who he would choose if the choice were between his immediate family and his “street family,” he responds, “My homeys *are* my family. . . my immediate family weren’t there for me.”

My Crasy Life won a Special Jury Award at the Sundance Film Festival, for “its intelligence and experimental play between documentary and fiction.” Much of the film, including scenes that appear as straight interviews, were scripted in a collaborative process between Gorin and the youths. Gorin has described his filmic strategy as using the camera as both a mirror and a stage: the gang members are performing themselves as they see themselves, but also as they want to be seen. Stylistically, then, and given the collaborative philosophy of the film, *My Crasy Life* stands somewhere on the edges of cinema vérité in that genre, “the activity of filming becomes a reflexive and catalytic encounter among all involved” (Ginsburg 1995:66). I locate this film on the edges of this genre, however, because the process of collaboration that created *My Crasy Life* took place outside of the film itself and because the filmmaker is absent from both the mirror and the stage. Viewers, then, have no access to the film’s collaborative yet backgrounded process of production and, importantly, no ground on which to evaluate the success of what the filmmaker states is the core commitment of the film, “to respect the voice of its ‘subjects.’ ”

It is within the complexities of the film’s merging of documentary and fiction that both the strengths and the challenges of *My Crasy Life* lie. The film’s strengths include the ways it enables viewers to enter what is presented as the meaningful world of these gang members, to begin to comprehend that world through the terms the gang members have chosen for us. The challenges enter, first, in the absence of context&zing cultural

information and, second, in the problematic positioning of the filmmaker: if the film is a blend of documentary and fiction, at which junctures in the film do the collaborative segments end and the filmmakers own interpretations begin?

We never, to our knowledge, encounter the filmmaker in this film: instead he is hidden, somewhere behind the camera, behind the scenes, and far behind the gang members. The absent filmmaker syndrome is particularly troubling in *My Crasy Life* because the closest thing the viewer has to an authorial narrative voice is that of a cynical and mean-spirited computer --a computer that other reviewers have interpreted as the narrative voice of the filmmaker. "Talk Mode" (which I name after the flashing words that appear when the computer speaks from its dashboard screen in the patrol car) is partner to "Jerry," a sheriff who takes an active interest in these young men's well-being. Jerry goes, for example, to Honolulu to speak with the family of a recently jailed gang member and enlist their support in relocating the youth to Honolulu and away from Los Angeles gang life. Yet viewers learn of Jerry's plans to meet with the family by way of Talk Mode's cynical commentary: "What's this? A flight itinerary--you've been holding out on me . . . it's your little friend again . . . you're going to visit his family, aren't you . . . why don't you give it up, just go to the beach." Viewers first encounter Talk Mode as Jerry is patrolling the Long Beach neighborhood of the Sons of Samoa in his sheriff's car: Talk Mode volunteers a weather report for the night, adding, "Chances are the gangsters will stay inside." In a subsequent scene, Talk Mode scolds Jerry for making a U-turn, then says, "Don't look away: I have some data for you." The "data" are sudden, full-screen, color stills of young men, presumably gang members, lying in pools of their own blood, murdered on the streets.

Near the end of the film, in the early dawn as Jerry is finishing a patrol shift, Talk Mode comments from the dashboard, "All the gangsters here . . . all those drive-bys and Raiders jackets filling my memory. . . a mystery. These gangsters, Jerry, do they hold as much mystery for you as they do for me?" The "mystery" of these youths is exacerbated in the film by the absence of the cultural information that would help to demystify the complexities of their lives: in particular, there are no aids within the film to help viewers understand the specifically Samoan dimensions of these young men's lives. The lack of cultural contextualization will pose particular challenges to viewers unfamiliar with Polynesian societies. When one young man talks about being stabbed, for example, he describes himself as having been "a warrior" until just before he was stabbed. Then, as soon as he was stabbed, he says, "the thoughts came to my head, and I was scared. . . thoughts came about my family. . . and I was just glad that I [lived]." Viewers

familiar with Polynesian societies will recognize the particularly Polynesian assumptions about personhood and epistemology embedded in this youth's depiction of thoughts coming to him (see Shore 1982). Most viewers, however, will not even notice the reference or, if they do, are likely to interpret it as idiosyncratic to the speaker, perhaps as another way in which this particular gang member refuses to take responsibility for himself: even his thoughts do not originate with him.

Similarly, the fact that the gang members are young men, aged fifteen to thirty, is cultural--not simply demographic--information. In many Polynesian societies, this period of life is named and attached to a particular set of meanings and expectations. In Samoa these young men would be *taulele'a* (Shore 1982:101, 231), while in the Society Islands of French Polynesia where I worked they would be *taure'are'a*: a recognized period in the life cycle (roughly spanning ages fifteen to thirty) characterized by freedom from responsibilities and a license to experiment with different jobs, intimate relationships, and living situations. It is a period of marked cultural indulgence: most adults expect *taure'are'a* men to get bored quickly with work and to quit easily, to move around, to have a series of lovers, and to spend much of their time hanging out with their friends and "doing nothing." In the Society Islands, however, while the cultural characteristics of the *taure'are'a* period frequently combine with certain political and economic currents to lead young men into nationalist (pro-independence) activism, they do not combine to lead young men into gangs. Place the same cultural characteristics of young male adulthood into the context of South Los Angeles and this life period suddenly becomes overdetermined by danger. In Samoa, these young men are likely doing no more nor less than what is expected of them; in Los Angeles, they are killing and dying.

NOTES

I thank Faye Ginsburg for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this review

1. At the Editor's request, the gang member's actual statement, "Fuck Margaret Mead," has been rendered as "F--k Margaret Mead" in the opening sentence of the review.

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