VISUAL MEDIA REVIEWS

Storytellers of the Pacific. 1996. Video, 2-vol. set, 120 min. Co-production of Pacific Islanders in Communication with Native American Public Telecommunications, ABC Australia, TV New Zealand, TV Ontario, and Nebraska ETV Network; distributed for Vision Maker Video by Lucerne Media (37 Ground Pine Rd., Morris Plains, NJ 07950; 1–800–341–2293; www.lucernemedia.com). US$150.

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STORYTELLERS OF THE PACIFIC brings together a remarkably powerful and diverse set of stories about identity struggles and cultural renewal in the Pacific and North America. The full set consists of two one-hour videos, each one grouping together six 10-minute films focusing on particular geocultural locales and issues that mark the cultural politics of each place. Volume 1, titled "Identity," includes segments on indigenous cultures in California, Hawai'i, Australia, Samoa, Canada, and Guam while volume two, titled "Self-Determination," presents films located in Hawai'i, Alaska, New Zealand, Australia, Mexico, and the U.S. Northwest Coast.

Storytellers was produced by Pacific Islanders in Communication (PIC), one of five minority consortia funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. It would be impossible to understand the significance of these films without understanding something about the context of their production, especially the formation of PIC as an organization that promotes works by Pacific Islanders themselves about the Pacific. Like most of PIC's productions, these are works of self-expression. They are told in a first-person voice, just as PIC describes its own mission in the first person as "a

media organization dedicated to bringing the stories of indigenous Pacific Islanders as told in our own voices to national public television" (PIC website: http://www.piccom.org/). This mode of filmmaking is consistent with a broad trend in documentary film described by Michael Renov: "By 1990, any chronicler of documentary history would note the growing prominence of work by women and men of diverse cultural backgrounds in which the representation of the historical world is inextricably bound up with self-inscription" (Renov 1996:2).

The Pacific Islands segments of *Storytellers* were directed by Heather Haunani Giugni, Lurline Wailand McGregor, and Maria Yata. They were first shown on U.S. public television in December 1996. This collection and others like it mark the maturation of video as a major vehicle for indigenous cultural production in the Pacific. As technologies with wide geographic and social reach, video and television are increasingly important as media for collective self-definition (Ginsburg 1995), joining poetry and fiction writing as perhaps the most significant vehicles for native voices speaking about social and cultural life in the Pacific.

Storytellers was produced in collaboration with the Native American counterpart to PIC, Native American Public Telecommunications, Inc. The juxtaposition of films about Native American peoples of Alaska, Canada, and Mexico with segments on Pacific Islands societies situates the Pacific stories in a wider context and underscores the emergence of a global discourse of the indigenous, defined in large measure by similar histories of colonization and cultural survival. Although widely separated in geographic and cultural space, the indigenous groups depicted in these films have all experienced the corrosive effects of colonization and find themselves today contending with dominant cultures within the bounds of larger nation-states. In these contexts the meaning of "indigenous" is always framed by relations of domination with non-indigenous groups and with the state.

As described by Pacific Islanders in Communication, *Storytellers* is about "the impact of colonization on the peoples of the Pacific Rim. It includes stories of Identity, Land Rights and Healing Stories." Although the specific local issues taken up in each segment are quite diverse (ranging from recovery of stolen lands in the Save Kahoʻolawe movement in Hawaiʻi to recovery of lost identities by Aboriginal children adopted out to white families), the themes of colonization and resistance frame the entire series. The film's narrator, Joy Harjo, a Native American poet, introduces both of the one-hour programs with the same preamble:

> We the indigenous peoples of the Pacific, Canada, the United States of America, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, and Australia come

> together with one voice to tell our stories of the impact of colonization. Europeans began exploring the Pacific over four hundred years ago with the full intention of acquiring new lands for their empires. Through colonization of the indigenous peoples they met they were successful in claiming the lands they came across. Colonization often resulted in the decimation of our populations, the removal from our lands, the loss of our languages, customs, religions, and identities. *Storytellers of the Pacific* celebrates the triumph of the human spirit over the impact of colonization on our self-determination.

The preamble to *Storytellers* is more than a statement of thematic focus. It is also a statement of purpose, spoken as a kind of incantation. Told largely through the personal stories of activists, scholars, and politicians, the films don't attempt to convey the kind of objectified histories typical of more-conventional documentary filmmaking. What they do provide are powerful statements of meaning and interest that give those histories social significance. Uttered in the collective voice of indigenous peoples, the introduction to *Storytellers* inevitably homogenizes differences among these stories, but it also captures an emergent sense of collective identity increasingly shared among native peoples of the Pacific and beyond.

To view these films is to come away with respect for the depth of commitment of those involved and a more-informed understanding of the cultural predicaments of Pacific peoples today. One of those predicaments is the dilemma of peoples living within multiple cultural worlds, bounded by sharply opposed identities such as indigenous and Western, traditional and modern, colonized and colonizer. While oppositions such as these tend to collapse complex categories into a few sharp binaries, they also illuminate the dynamics of power and domination that are a pervasive feature of life in indigenous communities throughout the Pacific. Each segment of *Storytellers* relates the experience of one or more individuals attempting to negotiate boundary crossings as they move between multiple identities.

In personal terms, these negotiations amount to daily decisions about identity in relation to indigenous and dominant cultures. Several of the films recount life stories marked by personal decisions to resist further "acculturation" and to recuperate lost identities, in some cases leading to dramatic transformations. These stories illustrate the importance of Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony as a process of internalization whereby the language and ideology of the dominant culture are adopted by subordinate peoples as their own, thus enabling domination without coercion. In the words of Greg Sarris, a professor of English at UCLA and elected chief of

the Miwa tribe of Santa Rosa, California, "People who have been invaded are never colonized, no matter what happens, until they've internalized the colonizer's idea of who and what they are." Similarly, Caroline Sinavaiana, a Samoan writer and University of Hawai'i professor of English, sees a kind of cultural dependency at work in American Samoa parallel to economic dependency. She likens cultural dependency to a form of "addiction" that is difficult to overcome precisely because it is so pervasive and naturalized in everyday life.

Each of these films portrays events and issues that link themes of cultural renewal and political empowerment—two themes that are consistently interlocked in the contemporary Pacific. In doing so, the films suggest some of the reasons why this is so: why culture is a major focus for political struggle and why indigenous political goals are almost always articulated in idioms of history and tradition.

Two of the communities that have suffered the most extensive cultural loss—Chamorros of Guam and Native Hawaiians—have both spawned movements focused on regaining land. These movements are depicted in the segments on Hawai'i and Guam included in the "Identity" portion of *Storytellers.* While the Guam video tells its story through the individual transformation of a well-known Chamorro activist, Angel L. G. Santos, the Hawai'i video presents a story of collective transformation focused on efforts to reclaim the island of Kaho'olawe, used by the U.S. Navy for bombing practice until it was turned over to a Native Hawaiian trust in 1994. Despite their brevity, these portraits manage to convey issues at the heart of contemporary movements in both places, telling a story about the volatile mix of military occupation, native activism, and cultural recovery.

The Hawaiian film presents a brief overview of the twenty-year struggle of the Save Kaho'olawe movement. Kaho'olawe became a focal point for Hawaiian activism in the 1980s, becoming a catalyst for the expression of native sentiments associated with land and spirituality. The film shows scenes of ritual, chanting, and ceremonial replanting that provide a glimpse of the symbolic power of the island as an icon of Hawaiian identity. Interviews with numerous political leaders who became involved with the movement underscore the formative influence of Kaho'olawe on the broader movement for Hawaiian sovereignty.

The Guam film is particularly effective because of its focus on a single individual, Angel Santos. Using the idiom of autobiography, it conveys a larger history of Chamorro identity and indigenous politics on Guam. Santos's story is a narrative of radicalization sure to get the attention of viewers unfamiliar with Guam history and politics. Recounting the origins of his own political consciousness, Santos recalls his thirteen years in the U.S. Air

Force. During that time he was stationed on Guam on three occasions and began to notice the marginal living conditions of local people. As he recalls, he asked himself, "Why did we become strangers in our own homeland?"

Aroused by his own experiences of discrimination within the military, Santos began to inform himself about the history of colonization that produced the conditions of today. These experiences led him to be "reborn to belong to a peoplehood," to see that his American education had overwritten an earlier sense of identity. The film's juxtaposition of photographs of Santos the Air Force officer, dressed in a trim uniform and posing beside the American flag, and Santos the native activist, appearing bare-chested and defiant, visually captures the identity contrasts that frame Santos's actions.

The story of Angel Santos moving through the phases of his life is also a story about the growth and mainstreaming of an indigenous movement. The film includes episodes of resistance or "civil disobedience" as well as of Santos running for election to the Guam Senate in 1994. In a memorable scene that has a quality of street theater, Santos and a compatriot climb a barbed-wire fence at a Guam military base only to be wrestled to the ground by military police and arrested. The "theater" aspect of the event is indexed by the presence of cameras: the filmmaker on one side of the fence and a military cameraman on the other, both filming each other filming the event.

That was on 14 August 1992. Santos narrates the entire sequence as a point in a process of political evolution: "I've learned that in using confrontation and civil disobedience as a first phase of the political process it was important first to promote a public awareness [of] historical injustices." The film then shifts to Santos as a well-dressed political candidate campaigning for a seat in the Guam Senate. He continues the narrative: "Having done that it is important for me to move on into the second phase and that is to change the laws that are not sensitive to the needs and the traditions of our people. So this is a political evolution. The first step as an activist [is] to promote such attention and create a crisis in this government so that the federal government would understand that the people are dissatisfied. And then the next process is to work within the system and to change those unjust laws."

Indeed, Santos is joined in his views of colonial history and injustice by other mainstream politicians, including the Guam representative to the U.S. Congress, Robert Underwood. Throughout the *Storytellers* films we see indigenous leaders discussing their views of the complex negotiations and accommodations required to mediate local and national political realities. Such accommodations are the primary theme of the segment on American Samoa, focused on Samoa's delegate to the U.S. Congress, Faleomavaega Eni Hunkin, four-term member of the House of Representatives. The Samoa

film visualizes these boundary crossings by showing Faleomavaega in Washington, D.C., on the floor of the House and then following him as he returns home to Samoa for campaigning. In talking to the camera he underscores the meaning of these movements for his own identity: "No matter where a Samoan goes, he will always come back here. Whether he's gone ten years, fifty years. You know, I'm an example. I didn't return literally until almost thirty years. And to come back, I had to go back to the traditions and try and learn again the culture and the mores, the village councils, the whole works."

For Hunkin, the relation between indigenous and American cultural worlds is more often one of mutual accommodation than rejection and resistance. He sees an ongoing "adaptation" of Samoan ways at the same time as he sees the "Samoanization" of American practices. "What makes our culture strong is our ability to adapt." As a result he feels optimistic about the "new generation of Samoans" and their ability to Samoanize "whatever the Western world offers."

The more optimistic views of a Faleomavaega are possible against a backdrop of cultural integrity in Samoan society characterized by a strong sense of language and tradition. Areas characterized by more severe histories of cultural erosion and erasure have produced more intense feelings of loss, anger, and the desire for recovery. The *Storytellers* vignettes chart this spectrum of sentiments.

In addition to land, a central focus for many indigenous movements is the recovery of language. So, for example, a woman commenting on language loss among the Aleut people of Alaska laments, "No one under 50 speaks the Aleut language fluently." Hawaiian author and professor of Hawaiian studies Lilikalā Kameʻeleihiwa articulates the primacy of language for indigenous identity when she says, "When you lose the gods you pray to that's really terrible. When you lose the land you live on because foreigners buy it up and you don't have money to buy land that is also terrible. When you lose your government and your sovereignty that's pretty horrible. But when you lose your language, you lose the soul of your culture, because you are forever disconnected from the wisdom of your ancestors."

Kameʻeleihiwa's statement introduces the segment on Hawaiʻi included in the second *Storytellers* program, "Self-Determination." That film focuses on the creation of Hawaiian-language preschools to teach Hawaiian children in the Hawaiian language. In choosing to focus on Kahoʻolawe and the Hawaiian-language program, the filmmakers have chosen two of the most significant, deeply felt topics in the movement for Hawaiian sovereignty.

Hawaiian-language preschools are at the center of a remarkable, ongoing story of language revival. The first "immersion school" was created on the

island of Kaua'i in 1984. Since that time the program has continued to grow, although never enough to keep up with demand. At the time of filming, one thousand children had become fluent speakers of Hawaiian as a result of these efforts. One constraint on growth, however, is the shortage of teachers. That is changing, though, with over one hundred Hawaiian-language majors at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, making that program larger than English.

The experience of language loss epitomizes the experience of displacement and alienation associated with colonization. The Australian film included in the "Identity" portion of *Storytellers* focuses on just this sense of alienation, fostered by Australia's mid-century policy of adoption that placed thousands of Aboriginal children in white households (an experience depicted poetically in Tracey Moffatt's imagistic short film *Night Cries*). In a policy that stopped in the late 1970s, twelve thousand children were taken and placed with white families in New South Wales alone.

The film addresses this history through the story of Aboriginal storyteller Pauline McCloud, who was herself adopted by a white family. Her decision in 1986 to locate her natural family led her to feel that her "whole life changed" and that she had become "an Aboriginal person in a true sense." McCloud's odyssey resonates with the experience of several people portrayed in *Storyteller*, especially Native American Greg Sarris, who was also adopted and only with difficulty managed to discover his own heritage and some of the historical reasons for his loss of cultural memory.

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Given that the cultural portraits conveyed here are concerned with personal and political moves toward empowerment, they require a form of representation directed by those involved. In an updated version of the phrase made famous by Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s, "the medium is the message." As noted earlier, these stories are authored and produced by Pacific Islanders. To do otherwise would be to perpetuate a long colonial history that has consistently Orientalized and anthropologized indigenous peoples as "disappearing" cultures represented in the discourse of others.

David Neel, a Kwakiutl artist and photographer featured in one of the *Storytellers* segments, discusses this point in terms that could easily be applied to the entire series and to the Pacific Islanders in Communication organization itself:

> The photography of Native peoples has never been conducted with respect, from a position of mutual respect. It has always been from

> a position of the other, coming from a viewpoint of Caucasian culture as superior. That has been the basic mentality, the basic philosophy of the people taking pictures, I believe. And I think you can see that in the work. I think that there are an awful lot of people nowadays who are trying to address that, both Native and non-Native. Photography and video and all of that has changed the way native people are perceived.

Neel talks about his photography in personal and spiritual terms ("Photography at its best can show a little bit of a person's soul"), but he also locates his work in a longer historical perspective. He reiterates a point made by writers from Edward Said to Donna Haraway: that Western representations of cultural others are almost always entangled in larger political and economic projects. In the case of indigenous cultures, he notes, "The idea of Native peoples as a vanishing race was created to serve a purpose. Native peoples were being disassociated from the land base and non-Native people were moving into the land. . . . Part of the way that was explained away is that Indians are a vanishing race."

Finally, a word about cinematic technique. *Storytellers* employs a number of visual and narrative devices to tell its stories. All of the segments combine political realism with personal voice. With a few exceptions, such as the appearance of ethereal ancestor figures in the Australian film about Pauline McCloud, there is little experimentation with modes of representation. In the Australian film, ghostly ancestor figures appear and disappear on the screen, superimposed on other images and accompanied by the spiritual tones of the *didjeridu.* In most of these videos, however, the presentation is more straightforward, presenting interviews interspersed with scenes of daily life as well as ritual and political events.

One of the judges at the tenth annual Native American Film and Video Festival in New York noted a difference between films from Canada, Mexico, and South America and films from the United States (which included *Storytellers of the Pacific*). As he saw it, "Films from outside the United States take a noticeably more artistic approach to the task of communicating native realities" whereas "the U.S. entries, by contrast, favored the documentary approach" (Apodaca 1998:B8). If this is the case, films such as *Storytellers* are documentary with a difference. They have moved away from conventional documentary practice where authority derived from a rhetoric of objectivity presented in the voice of an omniscient narrator toward a mode of authority that depends on a rhetoric of subjectivity and the voice of personal experience.

Because it is both documentary and self-expression, *Storytellers* is uniquely

valuable as an introduction to indigenous movements in the Pacific. It is the kind of teaching tool ideally suited to stimulating reflection and discussion, and would make an important addition to any syllabus in Pacific studies or ethnic and indigenous studies.

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