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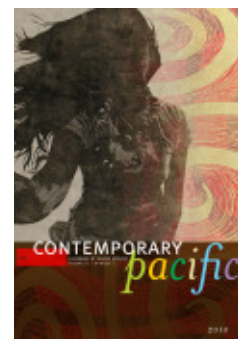
## **Samoan Wedding, and: No. 2**

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The chair is a constant ghostly presence: it doesn't speak, but it is quoted from often. It represents a family position: the burden of a title, the warmth of a family, it has a confessional symbolism that connects it with the spirit world, a silent wisdom handed down from the previous songmakers. The play begins with a chant, one of creation, the cosmogony of Sāmoa, out of the vanimonimo (the space that appears and disappears, outer space)—that space between (as Wendt describes the va in "Towards a New Oceania"), and which other theorists have labeled the differend (*The Differend*, Jean-François Lyotard, 1998), the third space (*The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha, 1994), or liminality.

The chair is a representation of the va—a cultural space; it emits an energy that the family itself expresses through such mediums as song and storytelling. The lineage the chair represents is an anchor, both for spirits like a taulaaitu, and for the family. For instance, in the playscript when Pese finds out about Lillo's child, he hugs himself in the chair; thus we see its role as refuge.

The three-quarter staging of the Kumu Kahua production emphasized the silent significance of the chair. The piercing cries of the owl, via the theater audio system, were the only sounds that emerged out of the va. I believe that the owl's significance is as a kind of family god or guardian creature (Māori kaitiaki, Hawaiian 'aumakua); I say that it comes from the va because the owl also comes from this ancestral and spiritual plane.

In death Peseola is oriented toward the chair, in the shadows behind it, with his photo on the wall, and we

hear singing in the Samoan language about the beauty of the ancestral homeland.

The great achievement of this play is that it generates so many levels of engagement with traditional, contemporary, and migrant culture, as well as New Zealand society from a Samoan perspective. The family spirit engendered by the drama remained for me well after the play had ended. Judging by the very warm audience responses at the two performances I attended, this play was a very successful production, crossing as it did from the southern to the northern Pacific.

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*See also Melani Anae's review of the 2003 Auckland production of The Songmaker's Chair in The Contemporary Pacific 17:270-273 (2005).*

*Samoan Wedding*, 97 minutes, 35 mm, color, 2006. Written by Oscar Kightley and James Griffen; directed by Chris Graham; produced by John Barnett and Chloe Smith. Distributed by South Pacific Pictures, New Zealand.

*No. 2*, 93 minutes, 35 mm, color, 2006. Written and directed by Toa Fraser; produced by Philippa Campbell, Tim White, and Lydia Livingstone. Distributed by Colonial Encounters, New Zealand.

The Hawai'i International Film Festival—regarded as the premiere film event in the Pacific—screened two New Zealand feature films during the October 2006 film season in Hawai'i—*Samoan Wedding* and *No.*

2. Significantly, each film features the writing, directorial (in the case of *No. 2*), and acting talents of Pacific Islanders, thus illuminating a critical change that has been taking place in the Pacific film industry since the 1970s. Over the last three and a half decades, Pacific Islanders have been taking control of the camera and re-presenting their stories, experiences, and images through a unique indigenous lens.

The romantic comedy *Samoan Wedding* (released as *Sione's Wedding* in New Zealand) is replete with cultural markers that work well to elucidate the presence of Pacific Islanders on the New Zealand landscape. The film's costume and production designers create a visual feast of tapa and floral prints, hibiscus motifs, and the ubiquitous Samoan lavalava, all of which provide the film with an unmistakable Pacific flavor, albeit self-consciously at times. In one scene a lush taro patch and a traditional umu (earth oven) feature in a suburban backyard—here, Samoan cultural sensibilities overlap with urban realities in a dynamic way.

The film's soundtrack—produced by Pacific Islander-owned record label Dawn Raid Entertainment and featuring the music of Polynesian artists such as Nesian Mystik and Fat Freddy's Drop—also provides a dynamic blend of contemporary sounds that reflect New Zealand's vibrant Pacific hip-hop scene. Stylistically, the film benefits from the directorial skills of Chris Graham (a Pākehā), who is well known in New Zealand for his award-winning music videos. Graham creates a riveting portrait of Samoan life within the folds of a multicultural, metropolitan cityscape. Panoramic

scenes of the city of Auckland, New Zealand, bathed in the pale orange glow of morning light are juxtaposed with the sultry interiors of hip, urban nightclubs, which are populated by fashion-conscious, first- and second-generation Polynesians “getting down” to contemporary beats—this is Island life with a twist.

*Samoan Wedding* follows the adolescent antics of four thirty-something Samoan friends who live in Auckland's sprawling metropolis. Michael (Robbie Magasiva) is a muscle-bound bicycle courier who has a penchant for “rich, sexually free white girls”; Albert (Oscar Kightley, who also cowrote the screenplay) is a painfully shy office clerk whose only close female relationship has been with his mother; Stanley (Iaheto Ah Hi) is a hopeless romantic searching for the perfect woman through a telephone dating service; and Sefa (Shimpal Lelisi) is a boozing party animal whose puerile behavior begins to wear thin on his live-in girlfriend, Leilani (Teuila Blakely).

Existing in a hazy world of nightclubs, alcohol, and perpetual hangovers, the four friends eventually hit the hard wall of reality when—after the latest in a long line of wedding disasters, of which they have been the primary instigators—they find themselves censured by their Samoan community and banned from attending the upcoming wedding of Michael's younger brother, Sione (Pua Magasiva). Desperate to participate in the nuptial celebrations, the four men begrudgingly accept the ultimatum given them by the local Samoan minister (Nathaniel Lees), who decrees that in order for them to attend the wedding, they must each find a respectable

girlfriend to accompany them. However, locating the right woman proves to be more difficult than expected.

What viewers will find most striking about *Samoaan Wedding* is that it makes a clean break from the well-worn themes of cultural displacement and social alienation that have characterized previous Pacific Island-oriented films such as *Sons for the Return Home* (1979), *O Tamaiti* (1996), and *A Day in the Life* (1995). While these fine productions (the last two are short films) have brought critical attention to the issues and concerns that frame the Pacific Island migrant situation in New Zealand, *Samoaan Wedding* concentrates instead on fleshing out the more ebullient moments. Unlike the central character in the film *Sons for the Return Home*, which is based on Albert Wendt's critically acclaimed 1973 novel of the same title, the young protagonists of *Samoaan Wedding* are not riddled with the anxiety of trying to negotiate their way between tradition and modernity; instead their feet are firmly planted in both worlds. While they are inextricably linked to a dynamic cultural network that involves community, extended family, and religion, they are also conversant with the complex individualism of Western society. These "cultural chameleons" are as comfortable attending church on a Sunday morning (barring a hangover from the evening before) as they are sipping cappuccino in a swanky inner city café. Although the lighthearted approach of *Samoaan Wedding* may be perceived as somewhat frivolous and lacking in substance, in a critical way, by focusing on a more buoyant theme—such as the search for a

date to take to a wedding—*Samoaan Wedding*, as cowriter Oscar Kightley put it in a recent interview with the *Honolulu Advertiser*, "shows Polynesia as quite normal, with as many loves and losses as anywhere else" (9 Nov 2006). It is this "normalcy" that provides a refreshing glimpse into an aspect of Pacific Island life that audiences do not usually have the opportunity to see on the big screen.

The dual screening of *Samoaan Wedding* and *No. 2* during the Hawai'i International Film Festival provided audiences with two very unique perspectives of the lives of Pacific Islanders in the contemporary period. Based on part-Fijian Toa Fraser's highly acclaimed stage play of the same name, the film *No. 2* digs deep into the multilayered experience of the human condition and offers rich insight into the complexities of migrant life in the New Zealand diaspora. Set in the middle-income suburb of Mount Roskill, Auckland, *No. 2* revolves around Nanna Maria (played by African-American actress Ruby Dee), an aging but strong-willed Fijian-born matriarch, who decides that the day has come to name one of her grandchildren her successor. Determined to make it a memorable occasion, Nanna Maria calls her grandchildren together, declaring, "Today I want a feast, a great big feast day!" But it is not just any kind of feast that Nanna wants—it is a traditional Fijian one, replete with the killing of a pig and the mixing and partaking of kava (or yaqona, as it is referred to in the Fijian vernacular). Nanna Maria also has a stipulation: outsiders are forbidden, including her own children. As the film progresses, the gaping fissures

that have long existed in the family begin to emerge.

As the five grandchildren—Soul (Taungaroa Emile), Erasmus (Rene Naufahu), Hibiscus (Miriam McDowell), Tyson (Xavier Horan), and Charlene (Mia Blake)—begin preparing for the event (albeit reluctantly at first), old family tensions rise to the surface and tears in the cultural fabric of their lives become apparent: none of the urbanized grandchildren knows how to mix kava, and the thought of killing a pig—a completely normal affair in traditional Fijian culture—poses a serious dilemma for them. In this way, *No. 2* highlights the cultural dissonance that first- and second-generation Pacific Islanders often experience as they become imprinted by the sensibilities of their modern surroundings and lifestyle.

Although the film takes place over the period of a day and an evening, it is easy to feel as though one has tracked the entire life history of Nanna Maria's family. The script is beautifully written and moves fluidly between dramatic tension and comic relief. The actions and voices of each of the characters also reveal the complex nature of familial relationships. In particular, the moments between Nanna Maria and Charlene—a young, single mother—are emotionally electric and convey in a powerful way the love between grandmother and granddaughter. Conversely, the strained relationship between Soul and his father Percy (Pio Terei) underscores the struggles of parents and children to find common ground and mutual understanding. In a significant way, then, although *No. 2* conveys the specificities of the Fijian migrant experience, it also contains a more universal

repertoire of themes, such as the joys and stresses that frame the dynamic arrangement of family relationships.

While each of the characters in *No. 2* resonates with powerful authenticity as they reflect the strengths and frailties of the human condition, there is nevertheless a certain cultural *inauthenticity* in the film that requires some exploration. Although *No. 2* centers on the experiences of a Fijian family living in the New Zealand diaspora, none of the main actors or actresses are in fact Fijian. In addition to African-American Ruby Dee who plays the central protagonist, Māori, Tongan, and Samoan actors fill the other key roles. This raises several questions that relate to issues of representation insofar as Pacific Islanders (specifically Fijians) are concerned. For instance, does the absence of Fijian actors in a film about Fijians constitute a form of misrepresentation? Moreover, is it reasonable to expect Pacific Island filmmakers/screenwriters to cast actors and actresses strictly on the basis that they match the ethnicity of the characters in the script? In considering the latter question, it is prudent to consider Vilsoni Hereniko's independent film *The Land Has Eyes* (*Peara ma 'on maf*) (2004). Filmed on the island of Rotuma, Hereniko's homeland, it is significant to note that the majority of the cast (approximately 98 percent), including the central character, are Rotumans (see <http://www.thelandhaseyes.com>). Indeed, the overwhelming presence of Rotumans in *The Land* provides the film with an undeniably authentic Rotuman voice, figuratively and literally speaking, since the film is predominantly in the Rotuman language (with the addition of English subtitles). In a similar

way, *Samoa Wedding* also retains a measure of cultural authenticity by featuring an all-Samoan ensemble of actors and actresses.

*The Land Has Eyes* and *Samoa Wedding* thus provide an interesting contrast to *No. 2*. While it may be argued that the absence of Fijians in the film denotes a kind of cultural inauthenticity, this should not necessarily be viewed as marring the film's integrity or value; there is a high degree of authenticity in terms of the narrative, which is written by a person of Fijian ancestry. Here, the line between inauthenticity and authenticity, representation and misrepresentation is blurred and not easily delineated.

Despite some drawbacks (specifically, actors who don't look Fijian, in a film about Fijians in Auckland), one of the great strengths of *No. 2* lies in its ability to capture the subtleties of the human experience. In one quiet scene, Nanna Maria lies alone on her bed, breathing in as much of life as she can through an oxygen mask. The knowledge of Nanna's mortality is made all the more poignant by the sounds of her family outside, laughing, fighting, living. And therein lies the denouement of the film—even as the breath of life is leaving Nanna Maria, it is being redirected into her family. One of the most exuberant moments in *No. 2* occurs during a fight scene between Tyson and Soul. As Nanna Maria watches the mayhem unravel around her—the two cousins pummeling each other with their fists; a tree in flames; and the main course of the feast, the pig, running loose—Nanna Maria exclaims jubilantly, "Look at all that life!" Indeed, such a statement perfectly sums up the two films reviewed here.

In expressing their own perspectives of the world, Pacific Island filmmakers are actively subverting many of the deeply ingrained stereotypes that have been projected on the silver screen and into the public imagination by Hollywood film studios. Divested of their cultural specificity, Pacific Islanders have historically been treated as exotic background foliage in films such as *South Pacific* (1958), *Blue Crush* (2002), and *50 First Dates* (2004), rather than featuring as central, fully formed characters. Viewed from this angle, *Samoa Wedding* and *No. 2* take their rightful place alongside a growing body of cinematic productions in which Pacific Islanders are primary contributors at all levels of the filmmaking process and appear in all their rich and glorious complexity at front and center stage.

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*Pacific Encounters: Art and Divinity in Polynesia, 1760–1860*. The Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, United Kingdom, 21 May–13 August 2006. Curated by Dr Steven Hooper, Director of the Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, University of East Anglia, on behalf of the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, in collaboration with the British Museum.

For people of Polynesian heritage, the Pacific remains the center of the universe. The great ocean that separates our islands—Moana-nui-a-kiwa—also connects and sustains us. We remain inextricably linked to our ancestors