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Painting Samoan hybridity – le Va

Using paint to mediate a position between two worlds

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Abstract

I have always struggled to come to terms of my position between worlds. Growing up involved constant friction between my Samoan heritage and Western upbringing; resulting in a bitterness towards an unknown Samoan culture. These feelings were to be confronted directly as I was asked by my parents to undertake the role of Matai – a Samoan chief. This research paper looks at cultural hybridity and how visual dialogue aids in resolving an internal feud of clashing cultures. The Samoan term ‘Va’ is associated with one’s position and connection, and the paintings produced alongside this investigation become steps towards a resolution by forming an understanding of my position as a hybrid. In the case of this research paper, traditional style oil painting on canvas becomes my mode of choice to portray this communication. The series of paintings created through this research project embodies my connection with Samoan spirituality. The connection is conceived as stories of a sacred world being familiarized through re-enactment and re-evaluation against the present world – my reality. As this journey unfolds, the question is raised: how can the process of painting account for and help mediate the various positions of my subjectivity and the pressure of initiation into the Matai system? Critical analysis of works produced by artists Odd Nerdrum, Kehinde Wiley and Greg Semu aid in finding an answer by investigating hybridity from a contemporary perspective. The resulting research evidences a visual mode of hybrid language that has the power to speak the unspoken; the given, the Va.
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Introduction: Painting and Chieftainship

I am the hybrid. My physical makeup is predominantly of Samoan blood, yet growing up I barely nurtured this branch with either water or sunlight. I have never considered myself a Samoan artist and in fact ran in the opposite direction at even the slightest hint of Samoan motifs, repetitive patterns or vivid tropical colours. My best efforts to disassociate from this unfamiliar culture were futile as growing up in South Auckland I was surrounded by Pacific peoples who preached of an Island life foreign to me. Samoa or the lack of Samoan connection especially within my artist practice has haunted me to this day. This rejection of one part of my identity is something that I still find troubling and it is something that I have given a lot of thought to as I began exploring the idea of hybrid identity. Even now the concept of the hybrid continues to eluded my questioning mind – and I feel more that I stand between worlds, paintbrush in hand.

I have been granted the opportunity to enter the realm of my abandoned culture, to finally face the vibrant beast head on. On a warm Sunday evening, my parents asked me to be seated as they asked if I would ever consider taking on a Matai (chief) title from my father’s village. This request came about as a response to the issue of security; to ensure that should something happen to them, my siblings and I can have a voice in the Winterstein aiga, family.

The veranda became the elected arena for many interviews with my mother. On this particular Sunday afternoon my mother Siaunofo ‘Nofa’ Winterstein explained the traditional role of the Matai as being a chief of the village; villages being made up of extended family¹. The Matai titles are handed down from generation to generation and are recorded in the legal registry system.² My mother then went on to explain that there is a hierarchy within the Matai system

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¹ Siaunofo Winterstein, interview by Xavier Winterstein, 17 May, 2015.
² Ibid.
that is distinguished by each name and Matai titles along with one’s village ties become a tool of interrogation to the residents.³

This research paper has constructed a platform to delve deeper into my Samoan culture and my cultural hybridity through the mode of painting. My artistic disposition lead me to a challenge that I have explored in this body of work: How can the process of painting account for and help mediate the various positions of my subjectivity and the pressure of initiation into the Matai system? I realise now after completion that my work was a response to an anxiety or even traumatic psychological pressure of taking on such an important role in Samoan culture. The process of investiture was as difficult as the body of knowledge passed on. In this way, my painting has been used as a way of processing stories and narratives passed on but also a way of mediating the pressure of my identity shifting. By painting the stories, in my own style, I took ownership of the Matai knowledge.

The strongest Samoan lesson my parents instilled in me, since my early childhood was hierarchy – the Va: my position within my family and religion. Fanaafi Aiono – Le Tagaloa attempts to explain the ‘Va’:

> Between Creator and created and between all of creation is the Va.  It governs all things and holds all things together… Va is relationship, connection, affiliation, boundaries, difference, separation, space, distance, responsibility, obligation, state of being, position, standing, and so much more.⁴

The idea of Va stems from Samoan indigenous religion that claims everything and anything, be it human, animal, plant, element or other are all connected through a shared origin.⁵ The creation story followed by Samoan indigenous religion introduces Tagaloa as the ancestor of all things livings, all therefore connected genetically through Tagaloa.⁶ This connection between everything is also shown through Samoan linguistics, in which words have various meanings: eleele – translating to both blood but also used to describe mud.⁷ Through the scope

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³ Ibid.
⁷ Ibid., 8.
of Va, all living things become an extension of the human body and hence the Western concepts surrounding human power over the environment is broken.8

Physically, Samoa is situated in the central South Pacific Ocean approximately 2,900 km northeast of New Zealand and has a population of 192,000 (2014 est.).9 Excluding American Samoa, Samoa consists of nine islands, four that are inhabited: Upolu, Savai’i, Manono and Apolima, and five that are uninhabited: Fanuatapu, Namu’a, Nu’utele and Nu’usafee.10 The capital city of Samoa is Apia and is located on the island of Upolu.11 Samoa became independent from New Zealand in 1962.12

Traditional Samoan beliefs explain Samoa was created by Tagaloa from the centre of the earth, making Samoa and its people sacred: Sacred – Sa, moa - the centre.13 In relation to land, it was believed land was a sacred gift and responsibility given to humans by God.14 It was to be looked after and used as required, then passed down the aiga (family) to continue the cycle.15 This perspective resulted in the idea that land was not to be owned or traded, solidifying their Va with the land.16 It wasn’t until missionaries from foreign countries arrived in Samoa that these ideas began to shift.17

When examining the culture of Samoa and its peoples, it is claimed that the concept of Matai (chief) embodies the essence of the Samoan way of life.18 Although recent government decisions have begun to nullify certain allowances of the Matai, even today the Fa’amatai (Matai-system) is still very closely rooted in the Fa’aSamoa (Samoan way of life).19 Erich

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8 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
14 Tagaloa, 134.
15 Ibid.
16 Wildermuth, 15.
17 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
Schultz authored a brief publication in 1911 titled ‘The most important principals of Samoan family law’ which explains:

The Samoan race is divided like a clan into families, aiga, which again are split up into groups of branches... At the head of every branch stands the matai, head of the family. One of these is the chief, matai sili, of the whole clan. Every matai has a name – igoa, suafa – which is handed down from generation to generation...

The Matai of the family branches either have their own rule or follow the rule of the Matai-sili depending on the origin of different families, which is traced back to the origin of that particular family. Matai is chosen as representatives of the aiga/village and also the ancestral gods: cementing a dwelling between earth and the spirit realm. It is perhaps this mediation, this spiritual imperative, that was the most difficult to come to terms with. This research project tries to account in some way for this spiritual question, by shifting the mediation of the earth and spirit, the real and the ideal, the mimetic and the fantastical, into an aesthetic realm.

The word ‘atua’ is translated by Walter Ivens to mean ‘the ancient one’, ‘the ancestor’. This has lead to the word being used to mean: a god, a spirit, a ghost. Affiliated with ‘atua’ is the Samoan term ‘aitu’: meaning spirit, ghost or demon. In another interview with my mother I enquired about her knowledge of Samoan spirituality, in particular the subject of aitu and spirit sickness. She claims that awareness of spirituality is emphasised more towards the rural areas of the islands. Aitu’s were virgin daughters of Matai’s believed to be taken alive by the spirits themselves. They have transcended to the role of guardians of the village, being able to shape-shift, usually turning into animals, birds and jewellery. As guardians of the village, their biggest weapon is possession – being able to possess someone, causing them to fall victim to ‘ma’i aitu’ (spirit sickness). When a female is possessed by an aitu, Mageo explains that

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20 Ibid., 159.
21 Ibid.
22 M. Meleisea and P.S. Meleisea, Lagaga: A Short History of Western Samoa (University of the South Pacific, 1987), 37.
24 Ibid., 135.
25 Ibid.
26 Siaunofo Winterstein, interview by Xavier winterstein, 8 June, 2015.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
she takes on the aitu’s “cultural stylized persona”. Mageo describes being induced with spirit sickness as ones mana being contaminated/out balanced by the aitu. ³¹ To be hit - ‘fasia’ by an aitu is Samoan euphemism for possession. ³² Both my mother and Mageo conclude being fasi’d, if left untreated, can be fatal. ³³ Treating possession calls upon the aid of a specialist, ‘faivai’ – medicine maker, but known to my mother as a ‘fofo’ – masseuse. ³⁴ The relationship between the spiritual and the living becomes an understanding respect. ³⁵

Prior to the arrival of religious missionaries to the shores of Samoa in the 1830’s, a relationship had already been established between the Samoan peoples and the spirit realm. ³⁶ Author Malama Meleisea explains “Religion, as it is generally understood, refers to a system of beliefs, the ceremonial and ritual activities that are associated with it, and the worship of a supernatural being or beings”. ³⁷ Supernatural beings were the centre of worship and became a vital influence of everyday life. ³⁸

Although feelings of disconnection weigh on my relationship with Samoa; family and religion have opened a pathway in the direction of forming a bond between Samoa and my own identity, the “I”. Spiritual, eerie, almost ghostly stories told by family members have followed me growing up; making claims to phenomena that happened through certain interferences with the unspoken laws of the land. These unexplainable, irrational stories embody the sacred-side of Samoa, and became my closest contact to a place that seemed so far away. As I trek further into the territory that is my ethnic home, I am slowly coming to the realization that the connection I have been scrambling to establish has always been rooted deep within, almost invisible to my spiritual eye.

Chapter One sets up the methodological framework of the paper using largely the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard and Homi K. Bhabha. In coming to grips with my hybrid subjectivity, the dilemma becomes the language barrier between the old and the present. Bhabha sets out hybridity as a site of difference and radical politics. Lyotard’s differend allows for a meeting

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32 Ibid., 363.
33 Winterstein, "Samoan Spirituality and Spirit Sickness "; Mageo, 361
34 Mageo, 365.
35 Winterstein, "Samoan Spirituality and Spirit Sickness ".
36 Wildermuth, 1.
37 Meleisea and Meleisea, 35.
38 Wildermuth, 1.
point outside the primary terms. The differend is the “grey area” which I had intuitively sought to represent in my painting. For Lyotard the aesthetic is the perfect vehicle to represent the differend because it is outside rational language and communication. My paintings from this perspective allow for a level plane of conversation.

Similarly, through Lyotard and the work of Bhabha, this chapter also lays claim to the importance of Lyotard’s ‘little narratives’ or Bhabha’s notion of the ‘non-dialogic’, that considers narratives, such as mine, which sit outside imperialist grand-narratives. In this way, the focus on my personal journey into initiation as Matai and the way my paintings embody this teaching is a form of ‘little narrative’.

Chapter Two casts my practice upon trans-historical issues of time and placement. It inspects traditional painting through anthropologic optics, revealing remnants of the past that are reframed by the present. It also surveys the alchemical history of oil painting, attributing Jan van Eyck as a founding father and master alchemist of the craft.

Contemporary artists of the medium, Odd Nerdrum and Kehinde Wiley both address anthropology in art through fusion of past and present imagery. I have focused purposely on traditional oil painting because I feel it has traditionally not been utilised to express Samoan spirituality. In similar fashion, Wiley’s use of traditional oil paint can be seen as a radical resistance to the metanarratives (largely Eurocentric) of painting and to create a rupture in this history.

Chapter Three leads one into the ‘spirit realm’, asserting a contemporary approach to spiritual art. It discusses the distinction between spiritual art and religious art, positioning my practice amidst. Author James Elkins explains the lengthy historic alignment of art and religious matters as a fascination of the ‘ghost story’. Reimagining these stories of an ancient land following ancient rules creates a personal connection bridging two worlds.

The contemporary allows again for an earnest engagement with the power of spirituality in art. Editor Finley Eversole suggests contemporary society is set to reclaim the power of irrational belief via the supernatural, and religious tradition. My story is partly explained through a move from a sceptic to an initiated believer. My practice represents this sincere shift.
Having said that, my paintings do not merely awaken spiritual history through these illustrated stories, but the collection of paintings embody and reify my attempt to come to terms with my hybrid subjectivity as explained in Chapters One and Two. This process of understanding through artmaking exhibits a personal point of transition – finding a position within my current identity for my Samoan culture. I have included a number of written stories as an appendix so that they do not unduly influence the structure of the research paper.

The collection of works created for this research paper attempts to address issues of cultural difference, transhistory and contemporary spirituality. Framing the whole work is my own journey which represents a little narrative, a singularity, which does not attempt to universalise or speak for others. These paintings then are very close to me and part of a process of investiture as well as initiation. On the other hand, I hope to be able to present to an audience something of my experience and heritage in a way accessible to the larger world – a world that not only consists of contemporary painting, but also the increasing number of individuals exploring and looking to resolve their own cultural identity throughout South Auckland and beyond.
Chapter 1 – Speaking the Unspeakable: Painting Hybridity

The collection of paintings I have created over this research period are a product of the different facets of my cultural makeup. They become a material means of resolution towards an inner conflict encompassing cultural hybridity. With a focus of my untapped Samoan culture, I have attempted to centralize the crux of these paintings around Samoan spirituality with the intent to awaken a linkage to my personal identity. This chapter will investigate cultural hybridity and its relative issues through the writings of Homi K. Bhabha and Jean-François Lyotard. Artists Greg Semu and Kehinde Wiley will also assist in gaining a perspective from contemporary art and show how painting might respond to the provocations of Bhabha and Lyotard.

Author and professor Homi K. Bhabha examines post-colonialism within his book ‘The Location of Culture’. Bhabha asserts that cultures that have been exposed to subjugation, domination, diaspora and displacement through history hold the key to unpacking ways of thinking about cultural identities. The strategy of culture, according to Bhabha, is both transnational and translational; transnational in relation to cultural displacement such as migration and global exploration, and translational due to the growing new age technologies pushing the question of culture and its significance. Bhabha labels these ‘the hybrid location of culture values’ and it is through these values that current contemporary theories of signification and judgement become defective. By looking through the post-colonial looking glass holistic and organic systems that aim to identify culture value become dated and obsolete, making way for new ways of thinking about identity and culture.

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40 Ibid., 246.
41 Ibid., 247.
42 Ibid., 248.
43 Ibid., 251.
It is by this shift of thinking that Bhabha begins to materialize the breakthrough that is ‘hybridity’.\textsuperscript{44} To begin understanding Bhabha’s view on hybridity it is imperative to grasp an understanding of colonial power.\textsuperscript{45} Colonial power is solely interested in preservation of authority over a conquered country.\textsuperscript{46} It aims to water down signs of cultural difference and reapply them within the borders of its authority.\textsuperscript{47} Bhabha explains:

The exercise of colonist authority, however, requires the production of differentiations, individuations, identity effects through which discriminatory practices can map out subject populations that are tarred with the visible and transparent mark of power.\textsuperscript{48}

Colonial power is built upon the recognition of cultural difference, but Bhabha argues instead that the effects of discrimination through the means of cultural colonisation is not to be visualised as binary oppositions i.e. dominant culture vs alien cultures, but instead as a dominant culture and its variations: a mutation; introduce the hybrid.\textsuperscript{49}

Hybridity is the product of colonial power but it is at the hands of hybridity that colonial power is subverted.\textsuperscript{50} Hybridity disrupts the authority that holds together colonial power as the ‘colonial foreign body’, the line which separates the dominant from alien, mutates to become something different. It is through hybridity that power is shifted; authority is no longer able to apply discriminatory identification because the hybrid is not limited to a specific set of features or cultural practices but instead unpredictable by nature.\textsuperscript{51} Professor Paul Gilroy asserts Bhabha’s claims as he explains that the hybrid is not anchored to any single nation or ethnicity, instead free to journey down a path that is not secured to any pre-established direction.\textsuperscript{52} For Bhabha, the hybrid is not merely a resolution between two opposing cultures, but a blossoming entity of its own – “the space it occupies be unbounded, its reality coincident with the emergence of an imperialist narrative and history, its discourse non-dialogic, its enunciation unitary, unmarked by the traces of difference”\textsuperscript{53}. When looking through Bhabha’s perspective,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 162-65.
  \item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 157-58.
  \item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 158.
  \item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 158-59.
  \item \textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 159.
  \item \textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 163.
  \item \textsuperscript{53} Bhabha, 165.
\end{itemize}
I can begin to identify how these issues are addressed in the paintings produced throughout my practice. My paintings become the surface or space on which hybridity is encompassed, the ‘mutation’ created through cultures that has left traces of its origin. Arguably the most obvious trace would be the traditional Western style painting technique used but there are others also: the use of my friends, the use of cultural artefacts, fashion signifiers (Samoan and Western) and other hybrid markers. This act of painting hybridity begins to function as the disrupter of colonial power, blurring the line that separates the dominant from the alien. It is the space between cultures that juxtaposes the urbanized Samoan figure and the European genre traditions of figure painting and history painting.

Bhabha proposes the hybrid as living both inside and outside of imperialist narrative with its conversation unspoken. The notion of the unspoken or ‘non-dialogic’ as Bhabha directly phrases it, becomes consistent with the concept of the differend. Coined by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, the differend is the incommensurability between two opposing languages. The differend marks the grey area between two languages to which there is no existing criteria in the quest towards a resolution. Adding to this, Lyotard correlates the differend to how history operates. Author Bill Readings explains Lyotard’s perspective upon history claiming: “History, like literature, becomes the site of recognition that there is something that cannot be said”. It is this way of thinking that opposes the ‘grand narrative’ mode of Western society – totalizing history in a singular narrative that covers all truths. In resistance to this Lyotard introduces ‘little narratives’ which aims to approach narrative as a “site of transformation and dispute”. Historian and postcolonial theorist Robert Young further gravitates the idea of hybridity towards the differend, explaining that intentional hybridity “enables a contestatory activity, a politicized setting of cultural differences against each other dialogically.”

54 Ibid., 159.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 165.
57 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 114.
60 Ibid., 62.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 63.
63 Ibid.
As considering myself a cultural hybrid, Bhabha’s concept and Lyotard’s differend resonate deeply with me and in relation to my struggles with identity building, especially in childhood. Whilst growing up, being labelled a ‘plastic Samoan’ referred to being of Samoan ethnicity but lacking the knowledge of the land, culture or language. Where I was raised, South Auckland New Zealand, is heavily populated by the pacific community so being outcast created a strong sense of displacement that followed me throughout high school and into tertiary study. I felt unaccepted by my Samoan culture for being plastic, but I also did not fit completely with the ‘kiwi’ community because of my Samoan appearance and aesthetics. It is within this middle ground that I find a position for my practice. It is amidst the grey area of the differend – the incommensurability of two cultures that face off inside the arena that is painting. Readings explains that Lyotard’s differend “works on a case-by-case basis” and that “It attempts to perform the kind of reading that might do justice to events in these domains”. It is here where painting becomes the perfect platform for this case; an arena where the opposing alien languages of my Kiwi upbringing and Samoan heritage can begin to fairly communicate the non-dialogic. This idea is expressed throughout the collection of paintings created from this research paper of mine, namely ‘Initiation’ (2015) (fig. 1) and ‘Healing’ (2016) (fig. 2). These works begin a dialogue between separate visual languages as the traditional Western approach to figure painting is voiced alongside the image of the kava bowl, and the narrative of my grandfather being cursed with spirit sickness is depicted as a young hoodlum sporting jeans and a college styled jacket.

Contemporary figure painter Kehinde Wiley also addresses such issues. Using traditional art-historical principles “the figure/the ground”, Wiley appropriates the format of old master altarpieces and three quarter portraits to transform his subject matter, being underprivileged black youth, into ‘aristocrats’. In his own words, Wiley explains that his paintings become “a perpetual play with the language of desire and power”. Author Nancy Bentley adds that Wiley’s practice helps unearth the realization of the self-proclaimed aims of European

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65 Readings, 114.
66 Ibid.
colonialism – to discover ‘truths’ (subjective to the European dominant culture) about all mankind.  

It is here that Bhabha’s notion of hybridity begins to be put in play. By substituting a black male upon the rearing steed in Jacques-Louis David’s ‘Bonaparte Crossing the Alps at Grand-Saint-Bernard’ (1801) (fig. 3), Wiley creates what Bentley deems “a black revolutionary”, enter ‘Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps’ (2005) (fig. 4). Hybridity works to undermine the colonial power by diffusing its greatest weapon: discrimination – identifying and segregating the minority. Wiley’s imagery creates a transparency of the partitions that enforce discrimination simply by “shifting a body from the place assigned to it”.

Through the scope of Lyotard and the differend, Wiley also uses the media of painting as a common ground for the voices of both the historically oppressive and contemporary suppressed. As the contemporary black figure becomes the centre piece of classic European historical narratives, the imagery becomes a result of the differend: “They give intelligible form to what is illogical or impossible for a given system or language”. It is within this plane that royal sceptres and noble poses of kings and saints can speak freely with urban sportswear and hip-hop poses. In similar discourse, I find that the notion of the differend allows me to manifest illogical imagery such as within ‘Initiation’ (2015) (fig.1). Seen here is a Samoan figure dressed in a branded hoodie and work boots posing in a hip-hop crouching stance. The figure is also involved in the Samoan kava ritual although using a Western style glass cup as opposed to the traditional instruments. The differend becomes a space that constructs conversation between the influence of hip-hop, Samoan culture and Western upbringing. It is within this space that my practice becomes intimate, with the ingredients that fabricate my self-identity being brought to the surface.

Contemporary artist Greg Semu is also the product of hybridity. Semu is a New Zealand born photographer who considers Samoa as his ‘ancestral’ or ‘spiritual’ home. The series titled

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70 Ibid., 299.
71 Ibid., 301.
72 Bhabha, 163.
73 Weinstein and Looby, 301.
74 Ibid., 300.
75 Ibid.
‘The Last Cannibal Supper, ‘Cause tomorrow we become Christians’ (2010) (fig. 5) follows a correlating narrative of ideas, exploring the introduction of religion upon the Pacific.\textsuperscript{77} Included in this series is a re-enactment of Leonardo De Vinci’s ‘Last Supper’ (1495-98) (fig. 6) using Kanak actors, the indigenous people of New Caledonia.\textsuperscript{78} Memories of a large, cheap, factory made reproduction of de Vinci’s painting hanging above a non-functional fireplace is also credited as inspiration for this work.\textsuperscript{79}

Drawing from personal recollection and self-reflection of being brought up in a religious island household; Semu opens up about his struggle with accepting these religious values shared by his family.\textsuperscript{80} “My personal interpretation is that ‘religion’ in certain hands is a weapon of mass discipline, clumsy, blunt, destructive and fragile and easy to abuse” says Semu, although he then admits he still has the utmost respect towards his family’s religion.\textsuperscript{81} Semu’s inner conflict between religion and his self-identity is resolved through photographic narrative between religion and the native pacific – which in turn becomes the two radically different idiolects of the differend. The mode of photography has granted a common dialect to these two languages that has helped Semu acquire a deeper understanding of his struggle. He affirms this by stating: “Religious colonization and indoctrination was a huge part of my life growing up… It’s a dialogue I don’t get tired of having, but it’s not so angry now. Now it’s more about finding solutions.”\textsuperscript{82}

Semu’s photographs become an act of rebellion as re-enacted scenes of Western histories are questioned as lines are blurred.\textsuperscript{83} As Bhabha states “Hybridity reverses the formal process of disavowal so that the violent dislocation of colonialization becomes the conditionality of colonial discourse,”\textsuperscript{84} it is suggested that Semu uses photography as a visual component of hybridity, functioning as an instrument of the hybrid in the re-evaluation of colonialism. According to Semu, photography is used as a mechanism for reverse psychology, explaining:

\begin{footnotes}{
\textsuperscript{77} Michael Fitzgerald, "Redefining Cultural Roots," \textit{Art Asia Pacific}, no. 81 (2012).
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 140.
\textsuperscript{82} Fitzgerald.
\textsuperscript{84} Bhabha, 163.
}
“In a way, it’s rebellious approach to re-appropriating symbolic imagery; then, not contaminating it, but distorting it and making it universal”\textsuperscript{85}.

I feel a strong affinity with the way in which Semu re-visits history within his practice and consider, in essence, my paintings to be renditions of stories surrounding Samoan spirituality. Just as Semu’s tries to provoke conversation surrounding colonialism, and my work strives to provoke conversation about cultural displacement. ‘Healing’ (2016) (fig. 2) narrates a scene in the story of my grandfather who is found cursed in the woods. The characters within the scene deviate from the original story as close friends of mine are used to re-enact the scene. This aids in resolving cultural displacement as it is through the differend the unfamiliar is transformed into the familiar – the traditional roles of the hero, victim and healer take on the characteristics of friends I have grown up with and are very close to. In similar fashion, these paintings are not interested in contaminating traditional imagery and values, but instead about creating relative connections.\textsuperscript{86}

Semu’s series titled ‘Battle of the Noble Savage ’ (2007) addresses the issue of cultural amnesia, which he believes was evoked by colonization upon the Pacific.\textsuperscript{87} In this series Semu imitates Old Master style paintings. Art Monthly Australasia editor Michael Fitzgerald writes that this functions as a guise, cloaking Semu’s acts of Pacific rebellion.\textsuperscript{88} Fitzgerald bring to light the connections between Semu’s piece ‘Battle of the Noble Savage 6’ (2007) (fig. 7) and Jaques-Louis David’s oil painting ‘Napoleon Crossing the Alps’ (1801) (fig. 3).\textsuperscript{89} Semu’s photograph depicts that of a rider set upon his steed, mimicking David’s image, but the difference is shown in the rider sporting a ‘moko’ – a traditional Maori design.\textsuperscript{90} The series is directed at the wars between the Maori people indigenous to New Zealand and the European settlers resulting in the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi.\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{85} Fitzgerald, 67.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
Battle of the Noble Savage can be described as a display of hybridity through mimicry. As Bhabha explains: “The display of hybridity – it’s peculiar ‘replication’ – terrorizes authority with the ruse of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery”\textsuperscript{92} Through Bhabha’s definition, Semu’s work functions through a mimicking of colonial histories. It aims at re-appropriating Western art histories and ‘reversing the tables’ as an act of reclaiming native precolonial history.\textsuperscript{93} This can be further justified as Bhabha states:

“Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an imminent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers.”\textsuperscript{94}

The issue of cultural amnesia is commonly addressed in Semu’s practice, particularly in the colonisation of the Pacific through the first wave of European settlers and the second wave of religious missionaries.\textsuperscript{95} This is evident throughout both works discussed, using a role-reverse approach which visually embodies the functionality of Bhabha’s hybrid.

In relation to the differend, Semu’s series ‘Battle of the Noble Savage’ provokes a visual dialogue between the indigenous Maori and European settlers of New Zealand during the early to mid-1840’s. It is within the differend that the Maori are able to be voiced as the triumphant keepers of the land as opposed to the uncultivated, primitive savages history has communicated them to be.\textsuperscript{96} What has materialized inside the differend becomes a disturbance of the grand-narratives of Western history as the oppressed becomes the oppressor – the savage becomes the cultivated ruler. This correlates with Lyotard’s beliefs that “cultural representations are too disparate to permit a universal point of view. Culture is not one field but as a series of local or minoritarian representations organized by narratives”\textsuperscript{97}. It seems that Semu’s photographs aim to critique the universal point of view as Lyotard, opening up a contrasting perspective. This is strengthened through Lyotard’s viewpoint that culture is made of an expanded field of little narratives\textsuperscript{98}: the Battle of the Noble Savage lying somewhere amidst the expanded field.

\textsuperscript{92} Bhabha, 165.
\textsuperscript{94} Bhabha, 122-23.
\textsuperscript{95} Fitzgerald, 67.
\textsuperscript{96} Loong, 10.
\textsuperscript{97} Readings, 65.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
Similar can be expressed about Wiley’s little narrative of Jacques-Louis David’s ‘Bonaparte Crossing the Alps at Grand-Saint-Bernard’. Bentley explains that the image of a black revolutionary figure triumphant upon his noble steed could not have existed during these times, yet forging such imagery begins to undo these European colonialism truths by suggesting new truths.\textsuperscript{99} Bentley introduces revolutionary general Toussaint L’Ouverture who was not given proper recognition for his achievements.\textsuperscript{100} Through such paintings Wiley is able to give “visibility to a historical black Napoleon who had long been unaccounted in the archives”\textsuperscript{101}. Lyotard’s concept of ‘little narratives’ is further explained as Wiley is able to unlock pockets of lost history, unaccounted in the Western grand narrative.

Furthermore, Bentley proposes that amidst the defiance of Western logic, the figures within Wiley’s paintings find themselves drifting both inside and outside the coordinates of rational space.\textsuperscript{102} Relative to the function that mimicking is for the hybrid, the figures become both familiar and unfamiliar as black subjects are represented in a light they are assumed incapable of occupying.\textsuperscript{103} Like Semu, Wiley’s tables-turned approach resonates with the anticolonial power of Bhabha’s hybrid. In turn, Wiley’s practice begins to shine light upon little narratives of black subjects that undermine the authority of European history.\textsuperscript{104}

It is through the act of ‘re-examination’ that Semu’s work resides in the contemporary. As an example, Semu’s depiction of Samoan tattoo (tatau) becomes a catalyst for past traditions to be rediscussed by contemporary attitudes.\textsuperscript{105} The series titled ‘Earning my Stripes’ (2014) (fig. 8) showcases the process of joining the space between Semu’s two half sleeve tattoos with a traditional tatau design.\textsuperscript{106} Semu envisions traditional tatau as one of the few surviving genealogical legacies of Samoa.\textsuperscript{107} In this way, Samoan tatau is used as a contemporary symbol of pride and endurance as he explains “...having survived the last 200 years of colonial bleaching despite the threat of extinction from religious zealots.”\textsuperscript{108} Here, the act of tatau enters

\textsuperscript{99} Weinstein and Looby, 299-301.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 301.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 299.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 307.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 301.
\textsuperscript{105} Vance, 61.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
the now as a reaction to the contemporary world of diluted traditions and symbolisms blurred by consumerist culture.\textsuperscript{109}

The meaning behind the title ‘Earning my Stripes’ derives from the military term associated with acquiring a badge of honour through completing specialised tasks.\textsuperscript{110} In this sense, tatau acts as an initiation towards solidifying Semu’s place as a Samoan. The empty space between the shoulders is described by Semu as the Va: the space between.\textsuperscript{111} This correlates to the differend as being a plane in which separate languages communicate free of obscuring representation.\textsuperscript{112} Upon the frontline that is the human body, lost traditions confront current self-identity; resulting in a uniting of worlds, the bridging of the indigenous self and contemporary self which Vance acclaims as “a future incarnation of Samoan identity”\textsuperscript{113}.

There are strong connections with Semu’s Earning my Stripes and my painting titled ‘Quiet’ (2016) (fig. 9). Both are brought about with the idea of initiation: Semu and I delving into the past with the intention to resolve an internal conflict of identity. Where the empty space between his shoulders become the space of the differend, I believe mine can be described as the space between the two figures – the two images of the self. In turn, this space can also be portrayed as the Va. As introduced earlier, Va is many things “relationship, connection, affiliation, boundaries, difference, separation, space, distance, responsibility, obligation, state of being, position, standing…”\textsuperscript{114} In this instance, the Va encompasses all of these with an emphasis on my state of being as a hybrid – in-between cultures. To translate these ideas in terms of the differend, it is the two selves that become the two languages: Who I am as a Samoan and who I am as a modern day New Zealander. This is where my practice is solidified within the realm of the contemporary as it is through the revisiting of history with a contemporary gaze that new connections are found.

Wiley’s practice becomes contemporary by similar means. It aims to suggest separate historical outcomes by re-visiting history.\textsuperscript{115} Theorist Mieke Bal suggests: “we discover that

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 61.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 61.
\textsuperscript{112} Readings, 114.
\textsuperscript{113} Vance, 61.
\textsuperscript{114} Tagaloa, 7-8.
\textsuperscript{115} Weinstein and Looby, 307.
contemporary acts of quotation challenge the received meanings of older art and demand complex entanglements.” 116 It is inside the painted space that can be labelled the differend that Wiley materializes counterfactual histories that in turn raise awareness to factual issues of the now. 117 Through the mimicry of Western history, Wiley trumpets the issue Bentley articulates as: “Quite simply, there is no conceivable realism for a story of Africans or African Americans who belong as Africans to modern world history.” 118 Wiley’s paintings enable the black subject to be recognised as an essential limb, of its own living breathing identity, that must be accounted for as part of a whole body that is humanity. 119

The works of both Semu and Wiley narrate the condition of the postcolonial in the contemporary world. Offensive plays are stealthily orchestrated by Bhabha, unlocking the hybrid as weapon to challenge history. It is here that Semu is able to question colonialist religions pushed onto the Pacific and Wiley is able to emancipate the black subject as its own human entity with equal importance to all other humans. Lyotard’s concept of the differend then becomes the frontline to which these crusades are fought and resolved. Wiley selects the canvas as a domain for dialogue as oil paints materialize the opposing subjects. For Semu, his domain becomes the lens of photography. It is within this domain, the differend, that the contemporary and the historical are able to engage in a dialogic clash free of the limitation of mistranslation – both radical languages are able to communicate freely in a common tongue that is contemporary painting and photography. In conjunction to my practice, like Wiley, painting becomes the differend in which my hybrid self can create discussion with my Samoan ancestry. It is through Bhabha’s hybrid that the tool of mimicry/re-enactment becomes a crucial device in finding my Va: my place as a Samoan hybrid.

118 Ibid., 309.
119 Ibid.
Chapter 2 – Oil and Stone: Transhistory and Painting

When peeling back the layers of methodology behind my practice, the naked essence is revealed: I am a traditional styled figurative painter working with oils on canvas. By exploring cultural hybridity in my painting it illuminated the effectiveness of oil painting as a radical mode. This chapter will focus on figurative painting viewed through the scopes of such concepts as transhistory, survival and semiotics. Using largely the new methodologies of anthropology and visual studies it looks at how the contemporary is characterised by a more fluid and open approach to style and time. This intense conflation of place and time makes painting a robust vessel for expressing hybridity. It will also address the physicality and methodology of oil painting through an alchemical scope in conjunction with traditional styled oil painters, Odd Nerdrum and Kehinde Wiley (contemporary appropriators of Caravaggio, Rembrandt, and other old master of painting). One of the primary ways in which I try to come to terms with my chieftainship and Samoan heritage is through a rich fusion of past and present and the use of iconography of different cultures and approaches to art making.

Taking an anthropologic approach to painted imagery begins to open up ways of thinking about the relationship between the past and present. Art historian Aby Warburg is famous for questioning the sequence of time within art history but Georges Didi-Huberman claims Warburg’s research stems from concepts created by anthropologist Edward B. Tylor. These ideas begin with the supposed flaw of science of culture and that the development of culture is unable to be expressed through any formula, but instead only to be understood by casting attention upon history. This way of thinking helped mould Tylor’s critique upon historical lineage, instead proposing that the development of culture be thought of as a split of two intertwining models – the theory of progress and the theory of degeneration, resulting in what

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121 Ibid., 61-62.
122 Ibid., 62.
Didi-huberma describes as a time knot.\textsuperscript{123} This same thought process is received into the realm of art as Tylor explains: “It needs but a glance into the trivial details of our own daily life to set us thinking how far we are really its originators, and how far but the transmitters and modifiers of the results of long pasts... Transformed, shifted, or mutated, such elements of art still carry their history plainly stamped on them...”\textsuperscript{124} This concept is known through Warburg as ‘Nachleben’ and can be translated almost perfectly to what Tylor coins ‘survival’.\textsuperscript{125} In other words culture and art are not linear stories of progression but are always ghosted by the past. The present is a blend of past and present.

Warburg’s notion of ‘Nachleben’ is described by author Matthew Rampley as “The constant reappearance of repressed traumas from a distant past – their recurrence in a variety of symbolic images – disrupts the clean chronologies of art history...”\textsuperscript{126} In similar suit, Tylor introduces concept of survival as the interweaving of the theory of progress and the theory of degeneration – one movement seeking to evolve, the other resisting evolution.\textsuperscript{127} This ‘interweaving’ explained by Tylor and ‘repressed trauma’ experienced by Warburg in its visual form becomes the ‘stamp’: an indestructible imprint of time that will still stand present during the endless development of culture.\textsuperscript{128}

This concept progresses as Tylor’s survivals becomes expressed as ‘a masked reality’ or ‘ghost’: “something persists and testifies to a vanished moment of society. but its very persistence is accompanied by an essential modification – a change of status of signification”\textsuperscript{129} Rampley asserts that Warburg also shares a complimentary view stating “While the transhistorical image plays a key role in Warburg’s thinking, a central stand of his project is to consider how such an image is translated and modified at particular historical moments”\textsuperscript{130}. So in other words when something returns, a style or a motif, it may be modified, or declassed in some way, but it maintains a connection to that previous meaning or past use. Aby Warburg’s formulations allow for a unified surface of many places and times.

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{125} Didi-Huberma, 62.
\textsuperscript{127} Didi-Huberma, 62.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{130} Rampley, 23.
Evidence of this masked reality can be seen in the paintings of Kehinde Wiley; Wiley’s paintings rely on the multiplicity of cultures and histories in the same picture plane. Wiley’s painting titled ‘Portrait of Andries Stilte’ (2005) (fig. 10) displays many of these ghosts, one of which being the decorative patterns that drift from background to foreground, immersing the painted figure. Author Krista Thompson identifies direct links between the patterns used within Portrait of Andries Stilte and the textile backdrop displayed Hans Holbein the Younger’s painting ‘The Ambassadors’ (1533) (fig. 11). Thompson also uncovers various other references in history displayed in Wiley’s painting, namely the image of the gold mask symbolizing Louis XIV as the Sun King. The image of Louis XIV as the Sun King can be traced back to insignia used on cabinets during the time of Louis’ ruling. Through the views of Tylor, the ghosts of history takes form in many ways within this painting and a demonstration of how these ghosts change and modify in meaning with the movement of time can be explored.

Along with the comparisons between the patterns of Portrait of Andries Stilte and drapery in The Ambassadors, Thompson also notes influences of photographer Seydou Keita and sculptor Yinka Shonibare. All these assortment influences begin to morph the meaning of the pattern, not being able to be locked to a specific moment in history; although Thompson suggests that one way to read these symbols is that they act as an emblem of prestige relative to classic Western oil painting. It is also through these influences that push Warburg’s ideas of a reoccurrence of history in the present, questioning the lineage of history through [painted] imagery. Wiley’s imagery also plays into Tylor’s idea of a time knot, as historical symbols such as the golden mask is placed in the same space as the figure wearing contemporary hip-hop styled clothing.

Imagery within my own practice also speaks in Warburg’s tongue of transhistory. ‘Ill’ (2015) (fig. 12) is influenced from a story told of my mother’s grandfather getting cursed while cutting wood in the forest. Standing upon the collapsed figure is the image of a crow, depicting a

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132 Ibid., 493.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
135 Ibid.
spirit-being that is said took on the physical form of a crow. In this instance the crow can be expressed as a symbol of manipulation and mischievousness, but it can also represent destiny, personal transformation, alchemy and dark witchcraft. Here shows how the crow of my painting also encompasses many other connotations derived from many other points in history, thus showcasing Warburg’s concepts of the ever-evolving image. Also the act of juxtaposing the contemporary figure against historically charged imagery such as the crow can be viewed as an example of the time knot introduced by Tylor.

Another approach, more suited to the conflation of cultures can be found in the work of anthropologist Elizabeth Mertz who advocated a binding of sociocultural anthropological studies and linguistic research to form semiotic anthropology. Mertz explains semiotic anthropology as “a bridge between the learning generated about the social and cultural worlds around us by anthropological research, on the one hand, and the public’s understanding of those worlds, on the other hand”. Further exploration into this concept begins a shift into the realm of semiotics, thus introducing theorists Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes and their linguistic models surrounding the sign, signifier and signified.

Swiss linguistic Ferdinand de Saussure is a leading figure within the history of the study of semiotics: the science of language. In his book titled ‘Course in general linguistics’, Saussure explains his linguistic system of the ‘sign, signified and signifier’. This system deals with the relationship between a concept and a sound image; the ‘signified’ becomes the concept, the ‘signifier’ becomes the sound image and the relationship between the two becomes the ‘sign’. This concept can be simply expressed through the following equation: signified + signifier = sign. Also, Saussure adds that the relationship between the signified and signifier is arbitrary and therefore limited to the scope of the linguistic community.

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138 Ibid.
140 Roland Barthes, Mythologies (Great Britain: Vintage 2009), 131.
141 Saussure, Bally, and Sechehaye, xi.
142 Ibid., 65.
143 Ibid., 66.
144 Ibid., 67-69.
Following this theory, French theorist Roland Barthes coined the term ‘myth’.

In Barthes’ book titled ‘Mythologies’ he explains that ‘myth’ is “a type of speech... a system of communication, that it is a message”. He adds that anything that can be discussed in discourse can be a myth, and that anything can be discussed with discourse, therefore anything can be a myth. The concept of ‘myth’ is a continuation of Saussure’s system surrounding sign, signified and signifier. Where Saussure expresses the equation: signified + signifier = sign; for myth, Barthes explains Saussure’s sign then becomes the signifier, which together with the signified creates the second order sign: the myth. Barthes goes on to show an example of myth in the cover of ‘Paris-Match’, which depicts a saluting young Negro dressed in French uniform with his eyes uplifted. Although Barthes mainly uses this concept to critique and discuss advertisement strategies, it can also benefit discussions of artworks when looking at visual art as a form of communication, much like advertisement. With these concepts as a semiotic scope, one can attempt to unravel the myths and signs within historic and contemporary figurative painting.

I am aware that the images and symbols that I use in my own paintings may have ideological readings often beyond their primary meaning. For example, the use of certain sport clothing, can also be a sign of hip hop, which in term can be a sign of blackness and the politics surrounding that. A key influence on my approach to this use of multiple styles and signs is the Norwegian realist painter Odd Nerdrum. Nerdrum, influenced by artists such Rembrandt, Caravaggio and Titian, paints in a style highly reminiscent of their work; so much so that he has been labelled and takes pride in the title of kitsch put upon him. Although Nerdrum has been praised for his “old master’ style painting, he has also been victim to an abundance of scrutiny for his “striking representation of the inhumane”.

Nerdrum’s painting titled ‘Bork in Paris’ (2009) (fig. 13) depicts the image of a young male figure materialising from the shadowed background holding in one hand an easel, a paintbrush
in the other.\textsuperscript{154} Through the gaze of Saussure we can establish the signifier: a boy holding an easel and paintbrush, and the signified: painting.\textsuperscript{155} The relationship between the two, the Saussurian sign doubling as Barthes’ signifier, is established as a young boy who has a deep interested in painting.\textsuperscript{156} This together with the concept of painting unveils the myth: this is the ideal image of an aspiring painter.\textsuperscript{157}

Next, looking directly at the myth: the image of the aspiring painter; ideas surrounding contemporary painting come to light. In the book titled ‘Critical perspectives on contemporary painting: Hybridity, hegemony, historicism’, author Jonathan P. Harris talks about contemporary artists creating ‘paintings’ outside of traditional methods.\textsuperscript{158} He states “...painting is always more than what David Green calls ‘morphology, more than a medium’, surfacing a discussion about the rise of photo media and video in alignment with contemporary painting.\textsuperscript{159} With the rise of ‘hybridity’ within the painting culture, the validity of the idea that the aspiring painter works in traditional painting mediums is questioned. This question can be answered by looking at the influences behind Nerdrum’s practice, namely, the kitsch painting genre.\textsuperscript{160}

When interviewed by Maria Kreyn, Nerdrum is asked “So what, concretely, does a Kitsch person strive for?”\textsuperscript{161} To this he replies “They are trying to make a masterpiece. When you look at the last pictures of Rembrandt, why are you so fascinated? Because it is a blending of the greatest mystery with the fact that they look so old – older than even anything ancient.”\textsuperscript{162} This answer reveals that Nerdrum is not particularly interested in the truths behind contemporary paintings. ‘Bork in Paris’ is proof of this as it was painted in 2009; six years after Harris’ book on hybridity within the painting culture was published.\textsuperscript{163} In the act of disengaging in contemporary ideas as mentioned by Harris, Nerdrum is able to manipulate time

\textsuperscript{154} Nerdrum, 85.
\textsuperscript{155} Saussure, Bally, and Sechehaye, 65-67.
\textsuperscript{156} Barthes, 137-39.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 139.
\textsuperscript{158} Jonathan P Harris, Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting: Hybridity, Hegemonu, Historicism (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 17.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{160} Nerdrum.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{163} Harris.
by continuing the myths created by his greatest influences such as Rembrandt, Titan and Caravaggio.\textsuperscript{164,165}

Within the context of my practice, this idea of myth becomes a useful tool in revealing particular truths in the narratives executed. ‘Healing’ (2016) (fig. 2) is set out like a Caravaggio painting, with multiple figures posing in what seems like a frozen moment of a scene. Inspired by a story told of my mother’s grandfather, it narrates the moment the spirit healer/fofo attempts to heal the victim. The myth becomes important through key details of this scene. The pose of the healer’s arms and hands become a focus point, along with facial expression and stance. Barthes’ myth embodies the essence of my narratives, having the power to define the separate roles played and their relationship with both the other characters along with the viewer.

Stepping back in time down the path of the traditional oil painting, it is the artist Jan van Eyck who is praised as the founder of this medium.\textsuperscript{166} Noted as “one who took delight in alchemy”, Van Eyck produced many trials on his journey to discover oil paint, with much of his discoveries held under strict secrecy.\textsuperscript{167} Alchemy is defined as a medieval predecessor of chemistry, interested in the transmutation of matter.\textsuperscript{168} Author A. E. A. Werner discusses various recipes that Van Eyck is believed to have created to produce his oil paintings, bringing together ingredients such as nut oil, white lead, spirit of turpentine and gum mastic.\textsuperscript{169} This new medium introduced a brilliance and lustre to colours that previous painting mediums lacked.\textsuperscript{170} In turn, oil paint quickly became the medium of choice for painters across Europe, and is considered one of the most important breakthroughs of Western art of the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{171}

Elkin’s book titled ‘What Painting is: How to think about oil painting, using the language of alchemy’ brings about concepts that further explore the idea of oil paint in connection to

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{165} Nerdrum, 44-45.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 470-71.
\textsuperscript{170} Gotlieb, 470.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid.
Within this book, Elkins introduces a correlation between painting and alchemy, asserting both are connected through basic ingredients water and stones. Painting is a product of fluid and pigment/powdered stones. Types of paint such as oil, acrylic and water colour differ only by ratio of water to stone. Alchemy addresses stone in the sense of ‘Stone’ – the ultimate goal of alchemy, which aims at transforming something as fluid as water into a substance as solid as stone. Through the Elkins tinted looking glass, the oil painter becomes an alchemist, experimenting with mixtures of chemicals upon a solid surface and mastering techniques as paint and bristles become one. As paint is stripped down to its bare essence: water and stone, Elkins suggests the reason why most contemporary painters do not stray from traditional mediums is not through mistrust of technology, but with the intent of unravelling mysteries behind even the simplest materials.

When looking at works of Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum it is hard to ignore the weight of history behind his traditional styled paintings. In an article written by his son Bork Nerdrum, he reminisces over examining a painting of his father’s titled ‘Memorosa’ (fig. 14). Although clearly in awe of his father’s painting, Bork Nerdrum began to question why he felt so moved by this painting. He states “It was skilfully painted and depicted a gripping narrative, but was there something more?” In search of an answer, Bork Nerdrum turns to alchemy.

Through the scope of alchemy, Bork Nerdrum analyses his father’s palette consisting of red, yellow, black and white. An understudy of Odd Nerdrum by the name of Richard. T. Scott reveals a deeper insight into Nerdrum’s palette. This palette follows the same rule suggested

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173 Ibid., 1.
174 Ibid.
175 Ibid.
176 Ibid.
177 Ibid., 9.
178 Ibid., 34.
180 Ibid.
181 Ibid.
182 Ibid.
183 Ibid.
by Nerdrum’s son – it consists only of white, black and various shades of yellow that gradually shift to red.\textsuperscript{185} Beginning with titanium white, yellow slowly becomes a dark ochre which then transforms into a deep vermillion and ends with shadow casted by a mars black.\textsuperscript{186} It is revealed that this simple palette follows ideas of and ancient Greek philosopher and alchemist Heraclit, who assigns each colour to a designated stage: black – the darkness, white – the illumination, red – the turning point and yellow – the achievement or redemption.\textsuperscript{187} These stages are representations of human existence and nychthemeron – the full rotation of the sun around the earth.\textsuperscript{188}

According to Elkins:

\textit{“What matters in painting is pushing the mundane towards the instant of transcendent. The effect is sublimation, or distillation: just as water heats up and then suddenly becomes something else – an apparition hovering in the fictive space beyond the picture plane. The boiling point, just before the substance evaporates, is the crucial moment, and it is vexed.”}\textsuperscript{189}

When Bork Nerdrum revisits ‘Memorosa’ after unravelling the alchemical undertones, he is able to identify each colour-stage and decipher its meaning present within the painting.\textsuperscript{190} “The red twilight, the turning point, is manifested in the female figure… The moon, which represents the illumination in Heraclit’s model, lights the way through the darkness and reappears as the lantern brandished behind the mountains.”\textsuperscript{191} Bork Nerdrum concludes that this painting, when simplified to its purest alchemical form, is about light versus darkness – God verses the devil.\textsuperscript{192} In closing he adds that the painting is not just about the depiction of the never-ending struggle between good and evil, but transcending human limitations, and becoming “manifestations of the cosmos”.\textsuperscript{193} This statement combined with Elkins’ idea of a painters ultimate goal - to enter a space beyond the framed boundaries, reveals signs of a true alchemist.

\begin{enumerate}
\item[Ibid.]
\item[Ibid.]
\item[Nerdrum.]
\item[Ibid.]
\item[Elkins, 188.]
\item[Nerdrum.]
\item[Ibid.]
\item[Ibid.]
\item[Ibid.]
\end{enumerate}
Analysing painter Kehinde Wiley purely through his physical practice, it is hard to discount the inspiration of Italian rococo, Dutch portraiture, English and French romanticism. Utilising the concept of “super-rapturous light”, Wiley draws upon this idea common to classic European portraits. Wiley’s painting titled ‘Portrait of Andries Stilte’ (2005) (fig. 10) is a translation of Joannes Cornelisz Verspronck’s ‘Andries Stilte as a Standard-Bearer’ (1640) (fig. 15). Wiley’s rendition differs from Verspronck’s original in many obvious ways, but author Krista Thompson notes how light is utilised as a tool and correlates the idea in line with hop-hop culture – paralleling it to the term ‘bling’.

As a tool within Wiley’s practice, Thompson explains bling as a “focus on the intersection between hypervisibility and disappearance”. Within Hip-hop culture, ‘bling’ describes the conversion of reflected light transcending into sound. The term bling embodies the mode in which light is used by Wiley: to highlight subjectivities of the subject as well as addressing a “historical visual script of power”. Wiley often submerges his painted subjects in light to mimic camera flashes of paparazzi, in turn bringing the subject to the centre stage. This effect is heightened by the use of metallic paint included in Wiley’s inventory. When questioning why oil painters are oil painters, Elkins disregards the simple skill of illusion making, answering that every medium has the potential to perform such trickery. This begs the question as to why Wiley attributes so much importance to oil painting as opposed to numerous other methods of illusion making. Author Nancy Bentley focuses on Wiley’s historical influences and how they affect his practice. Bentley claims that Wiley’s historical references become significant in solidifying himself within space and history; as a child of the Old Masters, but also a successor. Giving some credit to Wiley’s rendering skills, Bentley suggests the painted figures transcend their flat backdrop and enter a place that lies outside

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194 Weinstein and Looby.
195 Thompson, 490.
196 Ibid., 491.
197 Ibid., 489.
198 Ibid.
199 Ibid., 495.
200 Ibid., 493.
201 Ibid., 491.
202 Elkins, 192.
203 Weinstein and Looby.
204 Ibid., 298.
rational geographic space. Credit is also given to the sheer weight of history behind these oil paintings; the subjects leave the linear plane of history as they are unable to locate a home within European humanism. Wiley’s works speak an Old World language of contemporary life. Although possibly only a personal preference, it seems that Wiley’s decision to work with oil paints intentionally draws upon the traditional weight attached to the technique, answering Elkins’ question.

Returning to what Elkins describes as the ultimate goal of the painter, Wiley arrives at transcendence through an unconventional means. According to Bentley, it is by way of historical weight that Wiley’s figures lift from the plane of the two dimensional into another unknown field. These re-enactments of history become manifests of all that is illogical within European culture sets, resulting in displacement that fuels travel into another plane of existence. Thompson also helps fuel this travel through the notion of ‘bling’ within Wiley’s practice. ‘Bling’ at its core is a transcendence of light to sound, and within Wiley’s paintings it is used as a tool to transcend light into power and status.

As my practice has evolved through each painting, I have noticed that I have gradually lessened my ambition for photorealism, instead finding solace in the physicality and territory of oil paints. Much like the alchemist Elkins’ writings describe, I venture upon a journey to understand this extraordinary yet simple substance that is oil paints. This medium becomes more than a means of illusion making, more than a convenient way to depict the spiritual narratives of my practice - it becomes an extension of my body, history and all. In the words of Elkins: “That is why [oil] painting is a fine art: not merely because it gives us trees and faces and lovely things to see, but because [oil] paint is a finely tuned antenna, reacting to every unnoticed movement of the painter’s hand, fixing the faintest shadow of a thought in colour and texture.”

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205 Ibid., 299.
206 Ibid.
207 Ibid., 300.
208 Ibid.
209 Ibid.
210 Thompson, 489.
211 Ibid., 489-90.
212 Elkins, 199.
213 Ibid., 193.
On a final note, it becomes relevant to mention alchemy and its uncanny connection to Christianity. Elkins speaks of rare alchemical books that include images of Jesus as the Son of God, identified through Hebrew text surrounding the figure. It is then suggested that the philosophers stone (a special compound that is said to change mercury into gold, create a universal dissolvent and prolong life) becomes a metaphoric symbol of Jesus Christ: it exists as both mortal and divine. Like Jesus Christ, the stone is a symbol of perfection on earth, and in turn can create perfection of the earth. As Elkins connects the philosophers stone to the instant of transcendence of painting, it can then be suggested a correlation between the transcendence and Jesus Christ – bringing together religion and painting. For me the alchemical connection to spirituality and the iconographical or semitoic relationship to spirituality that oil painting has is another reason behind my choice of traditional oil painting. The hybrid aspect of my work, is embodied in this hybrid medium that brings together multiple cultures, times and places in the one surface.

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214 Ibid., 184.
215 Ibid.
216 Ibid., 185.
217 Ibid., 184.
218 Ibid., 188.
Chapter 3 – Ghost Stories: Painting Spirituality

My practice enters the realm of spirituality not only through the ‘ghost stories’ I attempt to translate, but also as the act of painting becomes a vehicle of exploration into the self. From a contemporary perspective, editor Finley Eversole asserts “Contemporary art has rediscovered the irrational – in the depths of the demonic!”\(^{219}\). Following suit, this chapter will focus on contemporary spirituality and how it manifests into the art of today. It will also address spirituality from a personal perspective and how painting has become a personal aid in resolving my self-identity issues.

Upon entry into the sphere of the spiritual, art critic Clive Bell views the relationship between art and religion as a partnership, claiming “Between aesthetic and religious rapture there is a family alliance”\(^{220}\). Professor David Morgan then aims to redefine the definition of religion.\(^{221}\) He explains that it is not to be thought of as a cult-like body, but instead in perspective of the mystical and ritualistic practices popular with many artists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\(^{222}\) James Elkins also attempts to analyse the meaning of religion, noting that it is public and social, involving family along with the wider community.\(^{223}\) He also clarifies a contrast between religious and spiritual art, explaining an artist can be spiritual without being religious.\(^{224}\) In the distinction between the spiritual and religious, I feel my practice leans more towards the spiritual, bearing a heavier influence on precolonial Samoan spirituality. Although, through the personal venture of self-identity, it must be considered that my Catholic values play a part within my art practice. In alignment with this thought, Elkins concludes his views of religion in contemporary art explaining “the name God does not belong to the language of art in which the name it intervenes, but at the same time, and in the same manner that is difficult to determine, the name God is still part of the language of art even though the name has been set aside. That is the stubbornness and challenge of contemporary art”\(^{225}\).

\(^{221}\) Ibid.
\(^{222}\) Ibid.
\(^{223}\) Ibid.
\(^{224}\) Ibid.
\(^{225}\) Ibid., 116.
As professed earlier, the contemporary has rediscovered the irrational.²²⁶ Betwixt a time where unbelief and doubt is believed to have become the spiritual situation of the contemporary individual, contemporary art adjusts its cape as it prepares to exhibit one of its many powers: the power to reveal us to ourselves.²²⁷ His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama shares an equivalent view, announcing “We are launching ourselves into space, while we still have unexplored inner space. In this present time, our thinking should take a more inward direction”²²⁸. He then shines light upon the power of art, stating “The quality of art is that it makes people who are otherwise always looking outward, turn inward”²²⁹. The concept of mysticism can be linked with art when it involves an intimate relation with spirituality: a private connection with transcendence.²³⁰

Odd Nerdrum’s practice addresses mysticism through a deconstruction of time and place.²³¹ Author Michael Gormley analyses the scenes depicted in Nerdrum’s paintings, commenting on the striking likeness to nature although he admits there is no intention to replicate the natural world.²³² It is through Nerdrum’s paintings such as ‘Flock’ (2006) (fig. 16) and ‘Stranded’ (fig. 17) depict dim-lighted dystopian wastelands that embody enigmatic rituals and interpretations of common fables.²³³ This is where Gormley claims “Nerdrum’s work violates the ultimate Modernist taboo; it dares to depict spiritual realm… his work seeks to stir the soul and elicit feelings of both dread and wonderment. His paintings ever remind us of our tenuous hold on mortal order. We are feeling and fragile beings moved by omnipotent forces that seem to come both from within and without ourselves”²³⁴. Nerdrum’s paintings become a direct example of Eversole’s views of art as a visual means of self-reflection. As Gormley explains, Nerdrums paintings speak of the fragility of man, embodying forces that cannot be explained by logical means – Nerdrum awakens the irrational.²³⁵

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²²⁶ Eversole, 11.
²²⁷ Ibid., 12, 50.
²²⁹ Ibid.
²³⁰ Elkins, On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art, 106.
²³² Ibid.
²³³ Ibid.
²³⁴ Ibid.
²³⁵ Ibid.
In relation to Nerdrum’s depiction of common fables, Elkins introduces a group of contemporary artists to be thought of as religious thinkers, promoters of the ever-changing “imagination of religion”\textsuperscript{236}. It is through the evaluation of religious ideas, symbolism and values that these contemporary artists keep good relations between art and religion.\textsuperscript{237} The enticement of religious matters in contemporary art can be explained through a fascination of the ‘ghost-story’.\textsuperscript{238} This fascination creates an ever-evolving conversation between art and religion – “the re-imagination of a ghost story, enchanting and without end”\textsuperscript{239}. Nerdrum’s re-imagination of these stories present the viewer with a sense of familiarity, allowing for a personal connection towards his depicted dystopia and its inhabitants.\textsuperscript{240} Eversole also touches upon the reinvention of the ghost story, explaining that they become “the condition of man in relation to his world and overworld”\textsuperscript{241}. He goes on to recall the words of Paul Klee: “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible”\textsuperscript{242}. This becomes the potential of the religious thinker in re-imagining ghost-stories.

The collection of paintings amassed throughout the exploration of my research project are all, in essence, creations of the re-imagined ghost stories. In relation to Eversole’s ideas, the paintings become a product of a contemporary relationship between religion and art; using enchantment as a device to adventure into a storytelling that brings together ancient Samoan culture and my contemporary identity. ‘Found’ (2017) (fig. 18) addresses Samoan superstition that states it is a bad omen to keep any jewellery or valuable objects found on the ground as it is said to be deliberately placed by spirits whom attempt to test human character. The freedom of storytelling allows an illustration of this theme as pictured through my own lens. It takes the original story a step further by suggesting a young individual has found and taken the jewellery. The mood that follows is of isolation and a deep sense of unease as shown by the body language, facial expression, dramatic lighting and eerie surroundings.

As these re-imagined Samoan ghost stories materialize through oil pigment to canvas, I identify that the ultimate lure becomes materialization of the self. The translated stories of Samoan

\textsuperscript{236} Elkins, 191.
\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., 192.
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{240} Gormley, 33.
\textsuperscript{241} Eversole, 196.
\textsuperscript{242} Ibid.
spirituality have helped me reflect on my own personal condition: who I am as a Samoan hybrid. My Samoan culture which began as foreign and unfamiliar, has shifted that world closer to me. Through painting I have begun to establish a personal connection to Samoan symbolism, rituals and values. Eversole believes spiritual art to be credited for progression in the renewal of human sensibility. As a result of this, he claims “We must treat these works seriously because they thrust us into the heart of the search for meaning”.

My personal spirituality becomes overlapped with Samoan spirituality, creating an intimate relationship with Samoan culture that I believe varies from a physical connection to the place that is Samoa. Painting has not taught me the language, nor has it solidified Samoa as a place I consider home. Around the middle of June 2016 my family took a trip to Samoa as a well overdue family holiday. This would be the first time my younger sisters and I had ever visited the birthplace of our parents; it would also mark the first time my parents have returned in over 25 years. Overall, I enjoyed what felt like traveling back in time to villages my parents grew up and adjusting to the Samoan way of life which included a periodic type lifestyle revolving around family and church. It was a relief to finally be amongst what was only experienced through photographs and stories, although I still felt an outsider blocked by the language barrier and easily distinguished among the people of the land. It is a disconnection that will always be present until I devote time into learning the language and acquiring the physical skills needed to take residence in Samoa. Painting has not advanced me any closer to these skills, but instead has solidified a permanent residence for my ethnicity within my spiritual makeup.

It wasn’t until we ventured outside the main city into the more rural villages that I began to witness what was depicted in Samoan ghost stories. The island of Savai’i embodies a traditional Samoan way of life. Each village we passed through seemed eerie and quiet, untouched by the Western world. Villages were massed with traditional fale styled housing that encircled the communal church; metaphoric almost, as life in Savai’i seemed to revolve around the church and spiritual, superstitious-like rules. Sacred areas like the Saleaula lava fields demonstrated the essence of spiritual Samoa. The story told surrounding the lava fields is of a volcano that erupted, engulfing a church along with the villagers. As we followed the blackened trail of cemented lava, we arrived to an area of lava which seemed to have sunken

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243 Ibid., 29.
244 Ibid., 198.
in. Closer inspection revealed a gravestone inside the crater, which is said to be the grave of the only virgin of the village. It is then explained that as the lava engulfed the church and its villagers, it miraculously avoided the grave of the virgin, consuming everything around it. Standing witness to the ancient grave and church ruins granted substance to the narratives depicted in my practice. It is in these rural, sacred spaces that I felt truly connected to my Samoan culture as ancient narratives began to come to life.

The previous chapter addresses the painter as the alchemist. Inside the spirit realm, the painter becomes both the priest and the prophet of culture.\textsuperscript{245} As priest, the painter becomes the preacher of visual wonders, surfaced overlooked glories, and teaching the congregation through celebration.\textsuperscript{246} As prophet, the painter becomes the detective of false sanctities of culture, looking to forward the truths that remain.\textsuperscript{247} Eversole admits that traditionally the priest and the prophet are not eager to embrace each other, so the artist may begin to dominate in one selected role.\textsuperscript{248} To view myself as the priest, my paintings begin to celebrate spirituality and connection with the spirit realm. Paintings such as \textit{Initiation} (2015) (fig. 1) celebrate the symbols of a traditional land, and the relationship with the urban figure and youth. It looks to praise hybridity and the juxtaposed imagery that initiates a conversation. As the prophet, my paintings speak of a relationship that is not conventional. It reveals a personal, intimate, spiritual point of contact. Finding the spiritual demands attention inwards as the facade of Samoan patterns and vibrant colours becomes transparent. It seems that both the painter as priest and prophet both aim to progress culture through separate means; yet it is common for an artist to become dedicated to one role, but in response Evermore concludes that “at its most profound it merges into the other”\textsuperscript{249}.

In the closing of this chapter, spiritual concepts have re-emerged in contemporary art with advocates such as Odd Nerdrum. With crosshairs directed at the soul, this exceptional group of artists seek to address re-assessment of the self. A redefining of the concept ‘religion’ has meant abandoning ties with an institution, and focusing instead on the mystical. Elkins has described the interest of the mystical as a lure to ‘ghost stories’, a mode in which I have adopted within my practice. It is also through these reimagined ghost stories that I have established a

\textsuperscript{245} Ibid., 72-73.
\textsuperscript{246} Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{247} Ibid., 73-74.
\textsuperscript{248} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{249} Ibid.
connection to Samoan spirituality, a connection that becomes intimate and personal through the act of painting.
Conclusion

Looking in retrospect upon this intimate voyage, Homi K. Bhabha’s ideas surrounding hybridity have proved essential in stamping out a place for those who reside in-between worlds. With the intent of fundamentally challenging ‘colonial power’, Bhabha has advocated a shift of power to whose set of characteristics are limitless and nature unpredictable. These mutations of the once dominant power become an independent entity in its own right: The hybrid.

This also becomes the condition of my series of paintings created throughout this research paper. As each painting is unravelled, each facet of its makeup, be it the weight of traditional figure painting or the time knotting juxtaposition or translated cultural motifs, unites as it transforms to become independent painted creations; free from the constricting judgement of pre-existing criteria. Jean-François Lyotard’s concept of the ‘differend’ becomes the place of refuge where each of these factions is able to speak in a common tongue, resulting in forward steps towards a personal resolution. It is within the realm of the differend that personal issues surrounding culture loss and identity acceptance can be thoroughly investigated. Now, coming towards the closing of this research paper I have come to accept who I am as a hybrid, dwelling in-between a Samoan ancestry and a present western upbringing. Concurrent with the paintings produced, I feel at ease with all the separate facets of my personal makeup, accepting a harmony amongst them.

As claimed by Finley Eversole, spirituality has begun to re-emerge within the contemporary artworld. Traditional oil painter Odd Nerdrum validates this statement with his rendering of a dystopian spirit realm based on ancient fables. In a relative manner, Samoan spirituality has become the blueprint behind each painting I have created alongside this research paper. Having the power to cast attention inwards, the mysticism incorporated in each painting has paved an intimate bond to a Samoan ancestry that has haunted me growing up. These ghost stories narrated by close family become familiar as each story is re-imagined, granting creative freedom to use familiar faces and objects to manipulate these stories from a personal perspective.
Time knotting imagery of both past and present allows for new modes of context surrounding history. Artists Greg Semu and Kehinde Wiley both focus on re-evaluating recorded history by re-enacting famous historical scenes but instead substituting the Eurocentric cast with outsiders of history. The action of re-enactment could be described as a form of mimicry, explained by Bhabha as fierce weapon of hybridity in the combat against discrimination and recognition of cultural difference. My practice could also be considered as mimicry as I too re-enact scenes of the past although I detect a difference in temperament. Semu and Wiley take an aggressive stance against colonial histories, surfacing feelings of resentment towards such records and reclaiming history as they see fit. In contrast, the paintings I created speak the position of my attitude towards lost histories i.e. acceptance.

As my art practice has developed throughout tertiary study and in particular the years spent developing this research paper, personal perspective upon my heritage have developed in direct proportion. The anger and rebellion against a foreign Samoan culture that I once blamed for my sense of feeling ‘outcast’ have been transmuted, like stone to oil, into sombre tones of blues and purples. This mood aims to communicate an inner contentment and acceptance of my position as a Samoan hybrid. Although this investigation has not solidified a position atop the coconut trees, nor has it taught a benighted tongue traditional dialect of the land, it has instead humbled a gratified conscience. Painting signifies hybridity as an entity of it’s own, research allowing me to find a personal resolution of finding my Va i.e separate lives with an inner connection to my Western lifestyle and Samoan heritage. The confidence gained from this research becomes crucial when deciding to take on such an important role as Matai. In conclusion, this research has evidenced a visual mode of hybrid language that has the power to speak the unspoken; the given, the Va.

Future direction will be looking at ways to push the boundaries of this hybrid visual language.
Plates

Figure 1.
Initiation
Xavier Winterstein
2015

Figure 2.
Healing
Xavier Winterstein
2016
Figure 3.
Napoleon Crossing the Alps
Jacques-Louis David
1801

Figure 4.
Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps
Kehinde Wiley
2005
Figure 5.
Auto portrait with 12 Disciples
Greg Semu
2010

Figure 6.
The Last Supper
Leonardo da Vinci
1495-1498
Figure 7.
Battle of the Noble Savage
Greg Semu
2007

Figure 8.
Earning my Stripes
Greg Semu
2015
Figure 9.
Quiet
Xavier Winterstein
2016

Figure 10.
Portrait of Andries Stilte
Kehinde Wiley
2005
Figure 11.
The Ambassadors
Han Holbein the Younger
1533

Figure 12.
Ill
Xavier Winterstein
2015
Figure 13.
Bork in Paris
Odd Nerdrum
2009

Figure 14.
Memorosa
Odd Nerdrum
Figure 15.
Andries Stilte as a Standard Bearer
Johannes Cornelisz Verspronck
1640

Figure 16.
Flock
Odd Nerdrum
2006
Figure 17.
Stranded
Odd Nerdrum

Figure 18.
Found
Xavier Winterstein
2017
APPENDIX ONE

Examples of Spirit Sickness

The following stories were collected during the course of this research project from interviews with my mother Siaunofo Winterstein and older sister Dedrey Winterstein. They recall personal spiritual encounters and incidents involving close family members. These stories are centred on ma’i aitu (spirit sickness) and bring to light the rules and customs of traditional Samoa.

Example 1
Her mother (my grandmother) Luatolu Tauvala’au was fasi’d after giving birth to her first daughter in 1962. The reason being her husband (my grandfather) came to New Zealand often and would bring her back gift of beautiful clothes and fabric. Luatolu also had beautiful silky asian hair, was a size 10 and loved to sew Samoan traditional dresses (pea or puletasi). Luatolu made herself a red puletasi and showed off around town with her hair down. By the time she came home she was fasi’d and bed ridden for approximately four months. Her mother (my great grandmother) took two months to find the right fofo who then spoke on behalf of the aitu – who explained she didn’t like her prancing around in her red puletasi with her hair down. The fofo then told her she was to shave her hair off, which my grandmother did. It took another two months for the fofo to appease the guardian; so for the two months the fofo was looked after by my grandmother’s family.

Example 2
An aunty of my mother was very beautiful with long black hair. She looked in the mirror at night after her wedding to admire herself and she got fasi’d. The fofo couldn’t help as the guardian wasn’t appeased. My mother’s aunty claimed that when she looked in the mirror she couldn’t see her head, this drove her insane. After a few years of her going crazy, they bought her to New Zealand but couldn’t find a doctor to treat her and she was then institutionalised. Her marriage fell apart and was taken out of the institution by her family, where she looked to religion for asylum. After ten years of devotion to religion she was able to slowly recover,
having her good days and bad days. On her bad days she would suffer nightmares and has been seen running naked down the streets of Mangere, Auckland.

Example 3
My mother’s grandfather (my great grandfather) was the top chief (Matai) of his village Saina faleata. He went hunting one day and was chopping wood. Whilst chopping wood a bird landed on the piece of wood he was attempting to chop. It would not get out of the way so he hit it with a stone. To his misfortune the bird was a spirit and he didn’t make it home. He became violently ill and was brought home by the villagers. As he was going through the healing process the fofo spoke on behalf of the aitu saying “I was just a bird minding my own business, why did you have to hit me?”.

Example 4
My mother went to Samoa in 1980. One day she went for a drive in a very rural area. During the drive my mother and her siblings were singing and laughing loudly and told to hush by my grandfather (her father). He told them three times but they did not listen and eventually their car broke down in the middle of nowhere. Prior to the car breaking down, there was traffic on the road, but after the car broke down there wasn’t a car in sight for two hours. While they were waiting for a car to drive by my mother and her sibling went for a walk and found a waterfall. Although she knew to stay away from waterfalls, it was so hot that she decided to dip her feet in and splashed water on her legs. Her father then called them back and the car that did stop told them to say a prayer and then left. They followed the advice and said a prayer, miraculously the car started and they were able to drive away. At this moment none of them told him about the waterfall and they were all silent during the rest of the trip. By the time my mother got home her legs and wrists were covered in boils – the parts that were in contact with the water. She told her father what happened and in fear he sent her back to New Zealand. She was ill for two weeks after arriving in New Zealand and to this day she has scars on her legs and wrists from the incident.
Example 5
My older sister was in Samoa with cousins when she was 15. One night at about 12am while everyone in the house was asleep, my sister and a cousin awoke to hear dogs barking furiously outside. It sounded like the barking was directly outside the window of their room. The next day my sister asked if anyone else had heard the barking, to which no one recalled any barking from the dogs. This was bizarre as they all slept in the same room. This was later explained to them by the locals that it was the spirit of the village analysing the newcomers. The barking was an attempt to lure the victims outside.

Example 6
My sister went to Vaeala beach with family and wanted to swim. The beach was empty. My sister and cousins walked 500 metres into the knee deep calm water. An uncle quickly yelled for them to get out of the water and into the car as he explained this beach is very dangerous due to the rips. That same day a fireman and his son drowned at that beach.

Example 7
At a family reunion, cousins along with my sister got bored and found a river creek behind the area of the reunion. This creek lead to a waterfall. There where 15 people that went with one local leading the way. It was a tight walk so they had to walk in single file along the path. A cousin that walked inform to my sister picked up a necklace she found on the path and put it on. During the car ride home they told an aunty and uncle their story and they immediately asked her to throw it out the car window. This is considered a bad omen, as spirits test human character.
Bibliography


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