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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

*The Twelve Percent: A Documentary Film*

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Asian American Studies

by

Sumiko Rae Braun

2016

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2016

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

*The Twelve Percent: A Documentary Film*

by

Sumiko Rae Braun

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Renee E. Tajima, Chair

ABSTRACT:

*The Twelve Percent* examines U.S. Samoan college students and the unique set of obstacles they have to overcome. By highlighting the lives, struggles, and successes of these students, my thesis film enables a critical examination of the social, political, and economic issues facing Samoans living in the continental U.S. It provides a powerful and uplifting narrative of Samoan youth navigating different paths than those illustrated in scholarly and community research and popular cultural representations.

The thesis of Sumiko Rae Braun is approved.

Keith Camacho

Michelle Erai

Renee E. Tajima, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2016

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## I. Project Summary

The short documentary, *The Twelve Percent*, is a portrait of two first generation U.S. Samoan college students from the Los Angeles Harbor Region. Samoans comprise one of the largest populations amongst Pacific Islanders in the United States and face challenging social and economic conditions. Despite the “model minority” myth associated with Asian Pacific Americans, forty-one percent of Samoans in the U.S. are low-income with approximately 1 in 6 living in poverty.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Pacific Islander California incarceration rates have increased by a tremendous 192% in the last ten years, and Samoans remain grossly underrepresented in higher education.<sup>2</sup> Only a fraction of Pacific Islanders comprise the small percentage of students enrolled in California State University (0.3%) while the University of California fails to disaggregate their data in order to more accurately address potential issues of recruitment and retention for Pacific Islanders.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, football is often treated as a sole vehicle for the social mobility of Samoan young men. By highlighting the lives, struggles, and successes of Samoan American college students, *The Twelve Percent* enables a critical examination of the particular social, political, and economic issues facing Samoans living in the continental U.S. diaspora and provides a powerful and uplifting narrative of Samoan youth navigating different paths.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Community of Contrasts: Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in the United States, 2014* (Los Angeles: Empowering Pacific Islander Communities & Asian Americans Advancing Justice, 2014), 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> *A Community of Contrasts: Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in California, 2014* (Los Angeles: Empowering Pacific Islander Communities & Asian Americans Advancing Justice, 2014), 25.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.calstate.edu> and <http://www.ucop.edu>.

## *Samoans Navigating the School-to-Prison Pipeline*

By profiling two Samoan college students who intend to pursue careers in social work and nursing, *The Twelve Percent* provides an alternative representation of Samoans rarely seen in mainstream or independent media. The popular archetypes of Samoans rely on the masculine figures of “the Football Player, the Wrestler, the Bouncer or Bodyguard, and the Gangsta,” and are defined by their presumed large size.<sup>4</sup> Studies have indicated that these stereotypes have led to justifications in putting Samoan students on the “lower track” along with African American and Latina/o students.<sup>5</sup> They have also been evoked in cases where police officers have attempted to justify brutal treatment of Samoan civilians.<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that when schools do not support students of color in becoming educated, the options of dropping out and taking low wage jobs or earning money through illegal activities may be seen as more viable. This is especially the case in low-income families where young people face pressure to contribute financially.<sup>7</sup> It is also reflected in what is called the school-to-prison pipeline which prioritizes incarceration over education and refers to policies and practices that push young people, particularly those who are at-risk, out of classrooms and into the criminal justice system. As indicated by the findings in *A Community of Contrasts: Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in the United States, 2014*, Pacific Islander youth are being funneled through the school-to-prison pipeline. By focusing on higher education, the film does not intend to treat the

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<sup>4</sup> April K. Henderson, “Fleeting Substantiality: The Samoan Giant in U.S. Popular Discourse,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 23, No. 2 (2011): 269-302.

<sup>5</sup> See Anthony Ocampo, “‘Am I Really Asian?’: Educational Experiences and Panethnic Identification among Second-Generation Filipino Americans,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 16, No. 3 (October 2013): 295-324.

<sup>6</sup> Henderson, “Fleeting Substantiality: The Samoan Giant in U.S. Popular Discourse,” 269-302.

<sup>7</sup> *Widening the Lens on Boys and Men of Color: California AAPI & AMEMSA Perspectives* (San Francisco: Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, 2013), 13.

characters as exceptional to reinforce the myth of the American Dream. Rather, the film brings attention to these specific struggles Samoan youth face in navigating out of the school-to-prison pipeline and in accessing higher education.

### ***Recruitment and Retention of Pacific Islander Students in Higher Education***

As echoed in the title, only twelve percent of Samoan American adults, 25 and older, obtain college degrees nationally.<sup>8</sup> The film explores the experiences of Samoan Americans in college who despite “making it,” continue to face retention issues as an underrepresented group. A college education is commonly regarded as a viable way to improve one’s status in building a strategic network and accessing better occupational and employment opportunities.<sup>9</sup> The potential achievements of Samoan youth, and Pacific Islander youth in general, are not realized. Samoan American students who go to college must overcome a multitude of obstacles due to an educational system minimally providing information and other services to prepare and support students for an education beyond high school. Often, these students serve as the source of mutual support among their peers and additionally engage in recruitment to encourage and support current high school students. *The Twelve Percent* aims to humanize these struggles by addressing factors that pose challenges to Samoan access to college, strategies that students utilize to overcome and cope with adversities in order to get in and stay in college, and solutions students enact themselves as well as a broader call to provide greater access and opportunity for Pacific Islander in higher education.

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<sup>8</sup> *A Community of Contrasts: Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in the United States, 2014*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> “The Black-White Unemployment Gap for College Graduates: Finally Showing Signs of Improvement,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 27 (2000), 58-59.

## *The Legacy of Colonialism in the Samoan Diaspora*

Coupled with these issues of social and economic justice is the narrative of U.S. empire and the colonial present. To date, the Samoan islands are two separate polities: Samoa and American Samoa. American Samoa is one of over a dozen territories on the United Nations' List of Non-Self-Governing Territories and has been a U.S. territory since 1899.<sup>10</sup> The Berlin Act of 1899 placed the western islands under German colonial rule and the eastern section under U.S. rule. The post-World War I accord created a mandate system that redesignated Western Samoa as a New Zealand mandate while American Samoa remained a U.S. territory. The Samoan islands played a key role during World War II from supplying bodies for military service to serving as a Pacific outpost between the U.S., Australia and New Zealand in battling the Japanese. With the formation of the UN after the war, decolonization became one of its key projects—albeit an incomplete one. Independence movements sparked throughout the globe, and in 1962, Western Samoa won its independence from New Zealand. In 1997, Western Samoa changed its name to Samoa. However, the effects of colonialism and militarization are ongoing and pervasive throughout the Pacific.<sup>11</sup>

According to anthropologist Fa'anofo Lisaclaire Uperesa, one of the ways the United States justified the legitimacy of its overseas colonial possessions, which included Guam, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines in addition to American Samoa, was “its duty to continue its

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<sup>10</sup> David A. Chappell, “The Forgotten Mau: Anti-Navy Protest in American Samoa, 1920-1935,” *Pacific Historical Review* 69.2 (2000), 217-260.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the relationship between militarization and colonial subordination and their gendered and racialized processes in Asia and the Pacific, see Setsu Shigematsu and Keith Camacho, eds, *Militarized Currents: Toward a Decolonized Future in Asia and the Pacific* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

‘tutelage’ of the native peoples over whom it retained sovereignty.”<sup>12</sup> U.S.-led development and modernization projects, ideologically supported as a form of benevolence, drastically changed all aspects of Samoan life and differentiated the U.S. from “classic” European empires.<sup>13</sup> Samoan migration in the mid and late-20th century was directly influenced by these colonial policies. The impact of industrialization and globalization created economic dependency and led to urbanization and poverty.<sup>14</sup> In search of opportunities for employment and education, many Samoans moved through religious or familial connections or joined the military service.<sup>15</sup> Samoans from the western islands primarily migrated to New Zealand and Australia, while those from American Samoa often moved to Hawai‘i and California, namely the Los Angeles South Bay and Harbor region and San Diego. Samoans bring with them, in their predominant post-WWII migration, a tangible legacy of militarization and Western influence. By situating *The Twelve Percent* within this neocolonial context, a more comprehensive and nuanced treatment is possible in exploring how youth navigate family, culture, and identity while in higher education.

There also lies the question — how do Samoan diasporic peoples impacted by U.S. colonialism in their homeland engage in the politics of the settler colonial United States continent? American Studies scholar Alyosha Goldstein’s edited collection *Formations of United States Colonialism* makes the distinct contribution of placing “U.S. overseas empire and settler colonialism into the same analytic frame” as not only a means of comparison, but “as sometimes

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<sup>12</sup> Fa’anofo Lisaclaire Uperesa, “Seeking New Fields of Labor: Football and Colonial Political Economies in American Samoa,” *Formations of United States Colonialism*, ed. Alyosha Goldstein (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 214.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 214.

<sup>14</sup> Cluny Macpherson and La‘avasa Macpherson, *The Warm Winds of Change: Globalisation in Contemporary Sāmoa* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Paul Spickard, Joanne L. Rondilla, and Debbie Hippolite Wright, eds, *Pacific Diaspora: Island Peoples in the United States and Across the Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002).

mutually constitutive and sometimes conspicuously disjointed formations.”<sup>16</sup> The multiple histories and contemporary formations of colonialism in North America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific are essential for understanding how and why the United States is what it is today. While the making of *The Twelve Percent* uncovered collaboration of UCLA Native American and Pacific Islander college students working on education outreach and retention in their respective communities, this Native-Pacific relationship given their respective colonial formations requires further exploration.

## II. Project Need

### *Situating The Twelve Percent: A Critical Filmic History of Samoan Diaspora in the U.S.*

As previously stated, the Samoan American community faces various political, economic, and social barriers that impact their well-being. This has been reflected in films produced by and about Samoans that *The Twelve Percent* builds upon. In reviewing existing documentary and narrative films by and about Samoans and Samoan Americans, key themes emerge that roughly follow a chronology. I surveyed fourteen films directed and produced in Samoa and the United States, and referred to appropriate social and historical treatments of Samoans in my critique and assessment of these visual representations. Many of the films evoke issues of cultural retention and identity formation and show a fluid relationship between the Samoan diaspora and Samoan islands. In addition, the films that immediately followed the height of U.S. radical activism in the 1970s highlight social justice and community activism as well as question the impact of colonialism on Samoans. The 1990s marked a shift in centering Samoan American criminality and gang life which parallels the rise in popularity of West Coast gangster

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<sup>16</sup> Alyosha Goldstein, “Introduction: Toward a Genealogy of the U.S. Colonial Present,” *Formations of United States Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 4.

rap. Moving into the 21st century, a Western fascination with Samoan fa'afafine comes to light, but the primary focus shifts to Samoan success through sports, namely football.<sup>17</sup> The male “warrior” body is largely at the center of these films and is complicated through stories such as *Warriors Born: American Samoans in the U.S. Military* (2010). The centering of Samoan men and dominant masculinity was staunchly apparent as Samoan women were often left in the background of these films with a few exceptions. Outside of sports, gangs, and the military as the sole options afforded to youth, only one short dramatic narrative film, *Vaitafe: Running Water* (1981), focused on a Samoan student in college and seriously considered how youth and their families navigate economic and social obstacles in the pursuit of higher education. The limited availability of certain diasporic films, such as Dionne Fonoti's *Young, Gifted, and Samoan* (2008), posed difficulty in a true assessment of Samoan American film, highlighting the need for this work and the imperative to make such work accessible for community and scholarly audiences.

### *Activism and Art*

Two of the earliest documentary films on Samoans living in the Los Angeles area include Takashi Fujii's 1974 film, *Omai Fa'atasi: Samoa Mo Samoa*, and Micah Van der Ryn's 1991 film, *A Chief in Two Worlds*. Both films discuss culture and identity, and highlight community activist work to improve the well-being of Samoan Americans. In addition, both provide strong historical and social linkages between the U.S. diaspora and Samoa. While *A Chief in Two Worlds* follows its protagonist returning to his homeland, *Omai Fa'atasi: Samoa Mo Samoa* provides an illustrated history of European and U.S. colonialism and Samoan resistance.

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<sup>17</sup> Fa'afafine is a Samoan gender identity where usually a person assigned male at birth embodies both masculine and feminine gender traits.

*Omai Fa'atasi: Samoa Mo Samoa* is a documentary short about the Carson, California based grassroots Samoan community organization Omai Fa'atasi. It is proclaimed as “one of the first films documenting Pacific Islander communities on the North American continent.”<sup>18</sup> Omai Fa'atasi, which translates as “come together as one,” served the South Bay Samoan community during the 1970s by offering educational outreach, job training, health care resources, and advocacy for greater social services for Samoans. The organization lost their community center and most of their funding as a result of California Proposition 13.<sup>19</sup>

The film utilizes interviews, narration, illustrations, and footage of various events in the South Bay Samoan community including football games, performances, dances, car washes, and church services. Criticisms of the film include its lack of story structure and technical issues such as a lack of names and titles to indicate interviewees and speakers. Despite these issues, the film offers great insight into the struggles facing Samoan Americans at the time. One young woman offered how it was difficult learning English as a second language while other high school teens only know English, have never been to Samoa, and are considered as *fia pālagi* or “white washed.” Another interviewee discussed how there is self-hatred amongst the Samoan youth and that many aligned themselves with either a white or a Black identity while rejecting Samoan identity. Omai Fa'atasi wanted to give the youth a sense of history and validate their identities as Samoans.

Another key element to the film was the hypermasculinization of Samoan men. Youth in the film talked about being stereotyped as football players and dancers. A more critical

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<sup>18</sup> *Omai Fa'atasi: Samoa Mo Samoa*. Directed by Takashi Fujii. 1974. Los Angeles, CA: Visual Communications. DVD.

<sup>19</sup> Proposition 13 was an amendment of the California Constitution that drastically reduced property taxes on homes, businesses, and farms. It had a direct impact on funding for education and public services which depended on property tax revenue.



stereotype considered all Samoans as “troublemakers and fighters,” and these negatively impacted how Samoan youth were treated by law enforcement. The roles of men and women also seemed to be clear cut. A young man was told by his mother to join the military service as it was “the best thing for him.” He told her that he would go to school instead. For women, strict control was the cultural norm. They complained how girls were not allowed outside their homes, but boys could do whatever they wanted.

The film presented Omai Fa’atasi’s work as grounded in the other struggles at the time of ethnic minorities fighting for their rights and organizing their own communities. Released in 1978, it ends on a call to action for the U.S. Census to better account for the Samoan community and encourage policymaking to address the community’s economic and social needs. Van der Ryn’s *A Chief in Two Worlds* (1991) similarly highlights community activism in Compton, but after journeying to Western Samoa and back. The sixty-minute documentary focuses on John Hunkin, a Samoan resident of Los Angeles, and follows him and his family on a trip to Western Samoa where he goes through a formal bestowal ceremony and becomes a member of the traditional Samoan chieftainship of the matai system.

Hunkin came to the United States when he was sixteen years old to make money to send home to his family in American Samoa. At the time, he worked for a factory in Torrance for twenty-five years. He expresses that getting married changed his life and calmed him down. Because of his work ethic and stable financial situation, his wife’s side decided to make him a chief of the family. While women can receive chief titles, it is usually men who receive them through their descent groups. Hunkin had a bestowing ceremony in Los Angeles, but it was not considered legitimate. The director states how going with Hunkin and his family to the village of origin of the title allows him to see how the matai system is changing in the new transnational

context. Eighty-five percent of Western Samoa's land is registered with matai titles and cannot be bought or sold while it has become allowable for matai to live outside of Samoa. The film shows this process of going to Western Samoa to gain consensus of the entire descent group. They were concerned about what occurred in the U.S., and the orator who had performed the ceremony in Los Angeles admitted his wrongdoing and apologized for violating custom. Ultimately, Hunkin was given the title and they held an expensive feast and ceremony. Such an event is considered fa'alavelave which requires the giving of all matai for weddings, funerals, title bestowals, as well as any other life ceremonies or celebrations. Upon Hunkin's return to Los Angeles, he reveals how the practice of fa'alavelave translates over into the U.S. diaspora. While the practice of fa'alavelave is customary in Samoa, it can be difficult to uphold in the states. Samoans save for weddings, funerals, and title bestowals, which becomes expensive. Fine mats serve as primary currency, and all the matai have to contribute to represent the family. With two or three fa'alavelave held a month on average, Hunkin contributes a large amount of gifts and money. Some interviewees in the film say that matai have to be rich in America and the social system in Samoa does not translate over well in the U.S. However, as June Pouesi of Office of Samoan Affairs says, "You can't refuse. If you don't participate then you're not considered Samoan."

Another concern voiced by Samoan community activist Fuiavailili Ala'ilima is that the younger generations do not want to follow traditions because they feel alienated from Samoan culture. The youth may not understand the significance of the matai system or recognize the benefits of Samoan culture. This concern is also reflected in *Omai Fa'atasi: Samoa Mo Samoa*

as it informed the organization's work in educating and validating the youth and their identity and culture.<sup>20</sup>

In *A Chief In Two Worlds*, Hunkin goes on to become politically active. In March 1990, two Samoan siblings were killed by a police officer in Compton. The chiefs held a large protest in response, and formed the political body Compton Community of Chiefs. Hunkin served as head of the organization and sought to bridge the systems. The Mayor of Compton at the time, Walter Tucker III, expressed how this formation streamlines his work since he can go to the centralized body to make good policy. While John makes these interventions in Compton, the economic recession has impacted his personal life. The factory shut down and he lost his job, and at the end of the film he contemplates returning to Samoa.

The film also offers self-reflexive moments at the beginning as Van der Ryn describes his connection to Samoa as having been transnationally adopted by a Samoan family and considers how the film represents his subject. Making the film was a way for him to reconcile how his relationship to Samoa has changed. While painting a mural inside Hunkin's home to show appreciation in making the film, Van der Ryn asks Hunkin, "Since you're a chief, how do I show you as a chief in this film?" These moments indicate visual anthropological training on the part of Van der Ryn who also includes expert interviews with the artist and anthropologist Daniel Pouesi. Pouesi explains how the U.S. has had more influence on Samoans than any other culture in the world.

To trace *The Twelve Percent* in a genealogy of Samoan diasporic film is to consider how identity and culture exist in youth who have come decades after these moments. Questions arise such as, how are conditions different and how are they similar? Have the youth succumbed to

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<sup>20</sup> For an ethnographic study on Samoan youth living in the U.S. and New Zealand, see Ilana Gershon, *No Family Is an Island: Cultural Expertise among Samoans in Diaspora* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

these concerns or are they finding ways to reclaim culture and maintain a strong sense of identity? In the case of both films, the characters in *The Twelve Percent* occupy some of the same spaces in the Los Angeles Harbor Region and offer an opportunity to answer these questions.

A film segment titled “Identity in Transition” from *Storytellers of the Pacific* came slightly later in 1996 but focused more on the relationship between the U.S. and Samoa. Politician Eni Faleomavaega states that the U.S. was historically interested in Pago Pago for its harbor yet lost interest in the territory post-Cold War.<sup>21</sup> He expresses that it feels like Samoans are part of the American family and American Samoa is “not really a U.S. colony.” Juxtaposed with his comments are two scholars, Carol Sinavaiana and Tialuga Seloti-Sunia, who argue against the damaging effects of colonialism on Samoans. It has led to a questioning of self-worth, valuing Western technologies as superior over Samoan ways of living, and creating economic dependency. One issue targeted in the film is whether or not U.S. food stamps should be introduced to the elderly in American Samoa. Faleomavaega supports it while Sinavaiana disagrees, stating it further cements dependency on the U.S. Seloti-Sunia points out how new words are daily introduced from Western culture and that Samoans are losing their vocabulary and their language. Despite Western influence, Faleomavaega claims that Samoans have maintained the integrity of their culture. He feels the Western world offers positive things that can be “Samoanized,” adopted in the best way while maintaining identity as a Samoan people. As the film opens and closes with Faleomavaega and treats him as the primary figure throughout, there is an implied support of this position despite the brief dissent offered in the film. However,

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<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that congressional representatives from the U.S. territories like Faleomavaega have no voting power. See Eni F.H. Faleomavaega, *Navigating the Future: A Samoan on U.S.-Pacific Relations* (Suva, Fiji: KIN Publications in association with the Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific and the Pacific Islands Development Program, East-West Center, Honolulu, 1995).

these considerations of colonialism and community activism become less centralized in later films.

Other films deal with issues of identity but focus on artistic expression and cultural reclamation such as Ruth Tuiteleapaga's 1996 film, *The Samoan Heart*. The film documents the lives of two artists in American Samoa: Reggie Meredith-Malala and So'oialo Sven Ortquist. It explores cultural reclamation and issues of identity. Meredith-Malala, who doubles as an art instructor, shares how many of her students are disconnected from their indigenous art forms such as basketry. She wants students to find a part of themselves through reclaiming these cultural practices. As a mixed Mexican-Samoan, Meredith-Malala feels a strong connection to Samoan culture but also feels like an outsider as her father did not raise her with fa'a Samoa.<sup>22</sup> She respects his decision and works on learning the language as an adult. The emotional point in the film is when she tears up about how these things do not make her less Samoan but she still carries much discomfort about never fitting in. What becomes apparent is how deeply impacting it can be to have one's roots cut off, and how painful yet also empowering it is to claim that heritage and culture.

Ortquist also worries about so much tradition being lost. In his formal training, he never learned anything about Samoa so he instituted an indigenous art forms class through the museum in American Samoa. He relates the Samoan artform of carved wood to the Christian religion, and finds inspiration in traditional tattoo. He sculpts a Samoan understanding of Christianity that involves reimagining Mary wearing a fine mat and Jesus as an orator holding traditional implements and staff. He hopes to expose the younger generations through his work. Ortquist also emphasized the knowledge kept secret by the elders and how he gave the local men kava to

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<sup>22</sup> For further reading on mixed race Mexicans, see Rudy P. Guevarra, Jr., *Becoming Mexipino: Multiethnic Identities and Communities in San Diego* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

obtain knowledge from the “professors who live in the backyard.” He says that families take for granted that culture is learned at home, but their society has become more Westernized. As this film is set in American Samoa, it is revealing in how these issues are experienced on the “motherland” as well as in the diaspora. There are parallels between this type of cultural work as presented in *The Samoan Heart* and the engagement of the characters in *The Twelve Percent* who participate together in a Pacific Islands dance troupe.

### *Gangs, Sports, and the Military*

Overwhelmingly, the filmic body of work on Samoans from 1990s to present-day focuses primarily on men and dominant hypermasculine traits of criminality and gang life, sports, and the military. The 1992 film, *My Crasy Life [sic]*, directed by Jean-Pierre Gorin is notable its portrayal of Sons of Samoa, a violent street gang located in Long Beach, California. Young Samoan men are shown rapping, waving around guns, getting tattoos, explaining what various gang terms mean, drinking forties, and playing cards. While it won a special jury prize at the Sundance Film Festival, the film is troubling as a partially scripted documentary or “ethno-fiction.” It reads like a Samoan pseudo-documentary version of *Boyz in the Hood*. As Deborah A. Elliston writes, “Gorin has described his filmic strategy as using the camera as both a mirror and a stage: the gang members are performing themselves as they see themselves, but also as they want to be seen.”<sup>23</sup> However, a lack of cultural context renders the film a reductive Samoan spectacle. In the attempt to play with form, the lack of reflexivity is also a concern as the boundaries between scripted and unscripted are never clear and the filmmaker is never present. The issue of power comes to play as Gorin, at the end of the day, controls the final interpretation

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<sup>23</sup> Deborah A. Elliston, “The Not So Pacific: Pacific Islander Films at the 1996 Margaret Mead Film & Video Festival, 8-14 November 1996,” *Pacific Studies* 20, No. 1 (March 1997): 158.

despite collaboration with the film's subjects.<sup>24</sup> However, insightful moments, whether they are scripted or not, do take place, such as when the young gang members offer how they miss their connection to Samoa. Attending church as children offered them a direct connection to what was happening “back home” and in the larger Samoan community, but a sense of disconnect exists in their current city lives.

Social media indicates that a full-length Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E. documentary was in production during the early 2000s, however, its completion is not apparent. A trailer was available through YouTube, and profiles the music group as being forefathers in the hybridized rock-rap genre.<sup>25</sup> Hailing from Carson, Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E. came up performing music for church and experimenting with funk and hip hop but ultimately identify themselves as Samoan gangster rap. They released their debut album in 1990 and rose to broader popularity through collaborations with well-known metal bands such as Faith No More and hip hop artists like Mack 10. They have affiliations with the gangs West Side Piru and Westside Samoan Bounty Hunters. Many of the interviews in the long trailer focus on the “scary” large size of the members and them being ahead of their time in their particular hybrid style. They talk about getting shot, shooting up their enemies, and getting locked up. One of the interviewees warns, “Do not make them mad. Whatever you do, do not make them mad.” As popular Samoan figures in the U.S., Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E. arguably contributes to this hypermasculine and criminalized characterization of Samoans.

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<sup>24</sup> Elliston, “The Not So Pacific: Pacific Islander Films at the 1996 Margaret Mead Film & Video Festival, 8-14 November 1996,” 159.

<sup>25</sup> “Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E. documentary,” YouTube video, 7:46, March 25, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKdtzBTF7a8>.

*Girl Trouble*, a documentary released in 2004, is one of the few films that focuses on young women's experiences in the criminal justice system. Sheila Pasene is one of the main characters and is mixed Samoan-white from the Sunnyvale Projects in the San Francisco Bay area. The film documents her struggles over the course of four years along with two other young women. She deals with her Samoan father's alcoholism and frequent incarceration. The family has a restraining order against him but he returns home anyway, so Pasene has to find somewhere else to stay because otherwise she knows she will get beat up. At one point she tries to overdose on pills. Pasene herself is in and out of juvenile hall for multiple offenses from selling cocaine to a DUI to a hit and run, and eventually lands in SF County Jail for shooting her brother during a physical altercation. Lateefah Simon, Executive Director of California Young Women's Development and a major presence in the film, says these women are not "at risk" but rather "in risk." Simon encourages Pasene to tell her lawyer about her abusive home situation, but she is scared of bringing shame to the family or putting her siblings in an awkward position. She ultimately avoids prison and ends up on probation in a rehabilitative program, though she admits to struggling in changing her old behaviors. At the end of the film, Pasene is shown having completed the recovery program and working as a union carpenter's apprentice. Sobering statistics are offered regarding girls and the criminal justice system with very little funding provided for girls only programs. It is a tragic and powerful documentary that unlike the others, does not glorify this lifestyle. The film is rare in showing how young Samoan women are navigating social and economic difficulties and also turn to criminal behaviors out of desperation. While this narrative differs from *The Twelve Percent*, there are similar concerns in understanding how gender intersects with race, class, and indigeneity in tangible ways.



Samoan women cannot rely on football to get out of poverty and other options must be pursued, but football is heralded as the key to success for many Samoan men. Documentary films such as the 2005 *Polynesian Power: Islanders in Pro Football* and the 2015 *In Football We Trust* highlight and cement this particular narrative. Narrated by Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, *Polynesian Power: Islanders in Pro Football* chronicles the ascent of Polynesians in American football and the cultural history that defines this journey. Profiling two Samoan athletes, Pisa Tinoisamoa and Isa’ako Sopoaga—“one from the islands and one from the ‘hood”—*Polynesian Power* explores America's diversity and the challenge of chasing dreams. The film opens with the University of Hawai‘i football team performing the haka before a game visually tying Polynesian warrior culture to football. The accompanying animation demonstrates fierce and aggressive hypermasculine men. Pisa is framed as a troubled youth with gang involvement and multiple arrests impacting his college recruitment despite being a high school football standout in Oceanside, California. In American Samoa, Isa’ako is met by UH recruiters who marvel at his body and say he was “made for the game of football.” They comment on how the number of colleges who recruit in American Samoa have increased tremendously over the years. Throughout the film, both players are shown being drafted to the NFL. The 2005 film ends stating that 28 out of the 32 NFL teams have Polynesians.

*In Football We Trust*, an official 2015 Sundance Film Festival selection directed by Tony Vainuku and Erika Cohn, shares similarities with *Polynesian Power*. Football is treated as the best vehicle for social and economic mobility for Samoans as they come from a line of warriors and are “built for football.” As one of the athletes state, “That’s the only time I could hit someone and not get arrested.” The film intimately portrays four young Polynesian football

players struggling to overcome gang violence, family pressures and near poverty as they enter the high stakes world of college recruiting and the promise of professional sports.

One of the main diverging sports narratives includes *Breaking the Surface: The Greg Louganis Story* (1997), which is a dramatic feature about the life of gay mixed race Olympic diver Greg Louganis. However, the film only focuses on his Samoan ethnic background in the first few minutes when Louganis is bullied by neighborhood children for being non-white and struggling in school. His adoption by a white family and his journey as a gay athlete are the primary focus of his narrative. It is notable that his athleticism is not relegated to his Samoanness in the way it is with *Polynesian Power* and *In Football We Trust*. Whether this is due to his gay identity is not clear, but in the documentary film, *Paradise Bent: Boys Will Be Girls in Samoa*, it is suggested by interviewees that same gender relations are not considered normative for Samoans while fa'afafine, specifically assigned male at birth, are acceptable.<sup>26</sup>

In the 2010 documentary short, *Warriors Born: American Samoans in the U.S. Military*, warrior culture is also invoked to explain the high rates of U.S. military enlistment in American Samoa. A retired Lt. Colonel states, “We’re born natural warriors. We’re born soldiers.” One interviewee sees the infantry benefiting from the collectivist mindset and presumed toughness of Samoans. A private in the U.S. Army Reserves offers how he had a “blast” in boot camp while others were crying and quitting. What is most striking initially about the film is an interview with two Samoan girls about to undergo their physical examinations. They describe their families having financial issues and that military service would allow them to help their families and also

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<sup>26</sup> For further reading on the fa'afafine, see Dan Taulapapa McMullin, “Fa'afafine Notes: On Tagaloa, Jesus, and Nafanua,” in *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, edited by Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 81-94; Niko Besnier and Kalissa Alexeyeff, eds., *Gender on the Edge: Transgender, Gay, and Other Pacific Islanders* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014).

create a path to go to school. The schools even encourage their students to join the military as a way to access higher education. While military service is often cited at the root cause for migration to the states, it should not be dismissed as it is highly regarded in the community. The families of both characters in *The Twelve Percent* have military backgrounds, and this informs the diasporic experience as well as the pressures placed upon youth.

### *Gender and Sexuality*

In *Omai Fa'atasi*, it is clear that young Samoan women feel they are restricted in ways that men were not. In *A Chief In Two Worlds*, shows that women can be chiefs but usually men are bestowed titles. While the majority of the films focus on heterosexual cisgender men, a few do profile women, namely *The Samoan Heart* and *Girl Trouble*.<sup>27</sup> Gay identity is only present in *Breaking the Surface: The Greg Louganis Story*, while fa'afafine and gender non-conformity is explored in the 2005 film *Paradise Bent: Boys Will Be Girls in Samoa*.

Directed by Heather Croall, *Paradise Bent* is a documentary that investigates whether or not the fa'afafine, people assigned male at birth but express masculine and feminine traits, existed prior to Western contact and looks at more modern expressions of fa'afafine as being performative or hyperfemme. While the interviews with various fa'afafine on the island are insightful, the camerawork and editing bring an unsettling fascination with the subjects' genitals. In particular, the camera kept pulling focus on the crotch of one of the main characters. As an anthropological film, the Western gaze on the spectacle of the "Other" resonates strongly through these moves. Despite this exploitative feature of the film, interviews with community

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<sup>27</sup> Cis is the Latin prefix for "on the same side" which compliments trans, the prefix for "across" or "over." The term cisgender refers to individuals whose sex assigned at birth matches their gender. Cisgender can also be understood as a person who is not transgender.

members raise questions of tradition versus modernity with regard to fa'afafine. Many believe fa'afafine to have always existed in Samoan culture with their own clear place as engaging both man and woman roles in the public and private spheres. However, with the spread of Christianity, it seems some disapprove of the fa'afafine though will accept them out of respect. Others disapprove specifically of the more modern fa'afafine who wear make-up, dress in flamboyant clothing, and perform as entertainers because they attention to themselves. This source of conflict is rooted in a larger theatre between Western influence and traditional Samoan culture.

These issues led to the insistence of *The Twelve Percent* profiling both a cisgender man and a cisgender woman to explore how gender is differentially experienced. It is important to note that gender and sexuality do play secondary roles for Samoans as obligations to the 'aiga or family is primary. However, a limitation in the film is a lack of sexual diversity through a queer Samoan experience. Strangely, in *Paradise Bent*, it was insisted that same-gender sexual relations were not “normative” for Samoan culture while the fa'afafine were mainly considered important and accepted. While not all of these nuances are covered in *The Twelve Percent*, exploration in Samoan American gender politics provides some insights.

### *Education*

Released in 1981, *Vaitafe: Running Water* is the only film found that focuses explicitly on Samoans in education. The short narrative film directed by Foe Alo, Jr. and Takashi Fujii is primarily shot in American Samoa, Carson, and Wilmington. It follows Vaitafe, a fictional Samoan college student, in his struggles to finance his education in the states. Vaitafe has to work to pay for tuition but he is laid off. An uncle dies in Hawai'i and he is expected to send

money to his mother back in American Samoa to cover her travels in representing the family. When he approaches his college for financial assistance, they provide him no help and fault it to budget cuts. Vaitafe's uncle pressures him to join the military while Vaitafe unsuccessfully looks for work. A lū'au fundraiser held by his family raises enough funds to help support Vaitafe in another semester at school thus demonstrating Fa'a Samoa in the spirit of mutual support.

While some scholarly work discusses Pacific Islanders in higher education, many lump Pacific Islanders into the AAPI category to emphasize the diversity of the grouping without serious considerations of the differences between Asian Americans and Pacific Americans. Thomas Sakai Tsutsumoto's 1998 master's thesis, "Higher Educational Perspectives: Through the Narratives of Samoan College Students," offers one of the only in-depth qualitative studies on Samoan Americans in higher education featuring interviews with nine Samoan college students attending institutions in the Los Angeles area.<sup>28</sup> Tsutsumoto found that financial reasons were the primary barrier for Samoan access to higher education. Many students had to pay for their education while also meeting obligations to their families. He also cited the lack of support from both the institutions and the Samoan community organizations and churches. His study did indicate that student-run Pacific Islander clubs addressed their needs in helpful ways to motivate and maintain their grades and enrollment. These along with athletics and encouragement from parents and family were the primary resources that contributed to retention. While this study is over fifteen years old, it offers important structural recommendations such as an increase in hiring Samoan and Pacific Islander faculty and staff, high school recruitment programs, and Samoan and Pacific Islander coursework. *The Twelve Percent* can offer an assessment of what

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Sakai Tsutsumoto, "Higher Educational Perspectives: Through the Narratives of Samoan College Students" (master's thesis, University of California Los Angeles, 1998).

shifts have occurred in the early 21st century and how they have impacted the most recent generation of students.

While family and financial support is imperative to the success of Samoan American students, support also comes in the form of the small on-campus community of fellow Pacific Islanders. Sefa Aina explains his experience as an undergraduate at UCLA:

When I finally met the crew, I don't know who was more excited—me for finding them or them for seeing that there was another Pacific Islander who made it in. Oh yeah—now I was a “Pacific Islander”; if we were just a Samoan club, our twelve-member club would be cut in half, and today I'm sure it would be even less than that. No, we learned how to be sensitive to under-represented minorities, being that we were extremely under-represented ourselves.

Even though we were small in number, it was the first (but definitely not the last) time that I felt intellectually out of my league, especially with other Samoans. It was humbling, so instead of trying to wing it and interject whenever the conversation slowed down a little, I listened and tried to take it all in. These people in PISA were my new heroes. When we talked about things, they were things that really mattered, like politics. Not just local either but national and international.<sup>29</sup>

Aina's experience is similar to the students in *The Twelve Percent* who insist their involvement with the UCLA Pacific Islander Students Association (PISA) and formation of a Pacific Islander academic community helped them through their college education. These strategies, though not present in *Vaitafe* in which a sole Samoan student carries the burden of higher education, are notable as the numbers of Samoan and Pacific Islander students in general increase in the United States and U.S. colleges and universities.

*Vaitafe* is quite powerful as it touches on a variety of issues impacting Samoans in the diaspora and how family and culture can overcome these issues. Interestingly, this narrative was created in response to negative backlash to Fujii's earlier film *Omai Fa'atasi*. Samoan community members were unhappy with how youth were portrayed in *Omai Fa'atasi*.

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<sup>29</sup> Sefa Aina, “Fa'a Samoa,” *Amerasia Journal* 28.3 (2002), 143.

According to Hamid Naficy, the film “contained such frank language and antisocial attitudes by the young people that the community elders and parents criticized it harshly, prompting Fujii and VC [Visual Communications] to make *Vitafe* [sic]: *Running Water* (1981), a more positive film about the educational achievements of the youth.”<sup>30</sup> When few representations exist, much weight can be placed on a single film. Such considerations impact *The Twelve Percent* in wanting to reveal the good with the ugly, but provide otherwise an uplifting narrative of Samoan youth overcoming barriers.

Tracing a Samoan and Samoan American filmography from the late 20th-early 21st century reveals common themes and issues identified across activism and art, culture and identity, U.S.-Samoa colonial relationship, men and masculinity, gender and sexuality, and education. Findings include an emphasis on hypermasculinity, which makes *The Twelve Percent* unique in providing an alternative representation that centers a Samoan young woman and man in higher education opting for a different path. Some of the issues raised in earlier films around community activism and cultural reclamation will be addressed and updated through *The Twelve Percent*. With the characters and their families at the heart of *The Twelve Percent*, an examination of religion, colonialism, and militarization also resonates strongly with previous films and provides a situated understanding of Samoans in higher education. Ultimately, the film is informed by and in conversation with many of these cultural productions. Its character-driven narrative allows a qualitative brief into the contemporary struggles of Samoans in the U.S.

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<sup>30</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 65.

diaspora. And while other films have examined Samoan youth in the diaspora, their accessibility is limited even through the reaches of prestigious educational institutions.<sup>31</sup>

### III. Synopsis

In the United States, Samoans have high rates of poverty and are less likely to attend college and complete a bachelor's degree than almost any other racial group in the United States. Comprehensive data is unavailable due to the lumping together of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders which impacts the availability of culturally sensitive and appropriate resources. Additionally, Samoans are shown in popular culture and media as fearsome giants, gangsters, and football players which impacts how Samoans are seen by others and how they see themselves as well as plays a role in the limited options afforded to Samoan youth.

*The Twelve Percent* provides an alternative representation of how Samoan youth are navigating life in America and carving a different path of success. Shot in Los Angeles, Carson, Wilmington, and Long Beach, California, *The Twelve Percent* reveals the myriad of economic, cultural, and social issues that Samoan American youth face. The film tells the story of two college students, Tiny Bubbles Aranda and Scott Olomanu. Despite pressures to pursue other paths, they have navigated and overcome many obstacles in the way of receiving their degrees. Cultural reclamation and community engagement are strong forces in their lives as Aranda and Olomanu empower themselves and others while staying in school. Community activists and scholars put their stories in broader context bringing to light the specific issues Samoans, and

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<sup>31</sup> *Young, Gifted, and Samoan* is a contemporary film on Samoan youth and hip hop in San Francisco. I was unable to obtain the film for viewing despite queries through international databases and months long correspondence with the filmmaker.



Pacific Islanders in general, face while living in the continental United States and accessing higher education.

#### **IV. Creative Approach/Treatment**

##### ***Style, Structure, Voice, and Ethics***

Documentary filmmaking warrants ethical considerations. Robert J. Flaherty's 1922 film, *Nanook of the North*, is considered a genre-defining documentary film for its nonfiction narrative and deliberately imposed thematic meaning. Its success is what led to Flaherty and his production crew to Samoa to film the 1926 *Moana*. However, many ethical concerns have been raised by film theorists regarding Flaherty's methods in representing a "real life" Inuit family and Samoan village. Similar questions resonate nearly a century later among contemporary filmmakers:

What is documentary truth? How objective is the camera? Can you ever be objective like a social scientist? Must one show literal truth or can it be the spirit of the truth? And whose truth should you show? When you juxtapose material to imply new meanings, what makes your edited version more truthful or less so? When can you use poetic and emotive means, as Flaherty does, to evoke feeling? And what part does aesthetics play in persuading an audience?<sup>32</sup>

The questions Michael Rabiger raises help to guide considerations in the ethics of documentary filmmaking in conjunction with the ethics of social science research, paying close attention to form, methodology, subjectivity, reflexivity, and representation. Is social science research as "objective" as insinuated by Rabiger? Are the expectations of human subject research applicable in the same ways in the social sciences as in documentary filmmaking? Similar considerations exist for both. The politics, economy, and professionalization of both film and academia also play key roles in influencing documentary film forms though I look more specifically at Asian

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Rabiger, *Directing the Documentary*, Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2015, 43.

American filmmakers and their relationship with the film industry as it has shifted from the 1960s to present-day.

Although my work is creative in nature, I am committed to experimenting with form and method in finding the most powerful and impactful way to tell a story while also making ethical choices in producing representations. A consideration of the history of documentary filmmaking allows me to critically think about form, method, representation, and ethics, and to situate my own work in and consider interventions made by Asian American and Pacific Islander filmmakers. Reflexivity in filmmaking, an increasingly popular trend which disrupts positivist notions of the documentary, seems to be a most ethical approach as a certain view of reality is being shared not some semblance of objective truth.

A commonly accepted definition of the documentary is that it is a non-fiction film. It exposes the “truth” about people and events through the eye of the camera lens. However, this is not completely accurate. Take, for instance, the way in which Flaherty produced his film, *Nanook of the North*. Erik Barnouw points out that Flaherty recorded several “takes” to ensure a high quality recording. Flaherty had a special igloo built to allow the proper lighting and camera equipment. He filmed the Inuits on a dangerous whale hunt, forcing them to use antiquated techniques, which is in the vein of freezing the “native” in time, relegating them to the past.<sup>33</sup> When things appeared to get too dangerous for the Inuits, Flaherty offered no help and exploited their struggle for the sake of his film.<sup>34</sup> In his criticism of *Nanook of the North*, William Rothman writes, “Reality plays an essential role in all films, but in no film does reality simply play the role of being documented. Reality is transformed or transfigured when the world reveals

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<sup>33</sup> For further reading on authenticity, see James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, London: Oxford University Press, 1993, 36-38.

itself on film.”<sup>35</sup> Certainly the staged aspect of *Nanook of the North* is not simply reality being documented, but reality being manipulated or “transformed,” as Rothman puts it. The transformation or manipulation of reality draws a blurry line between fiction and nonfiction. To simply label Ross McElwee’s *Sherman’s March* (1985) as non-fiction does not do justice to the influential role the filmmaker takes in creating the action. Much of what takes place in front of the camera would not have taken place had it not been for the prodding and instigating from behind the camera. To simply label it as fiction ignores the fact that there were real people, performing as themselves in front of a camera.

Bill Nichols, an authoritative voice on documentary film theory, further explores the issue. He does not make the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, fiction and documentary, but between “documentaries of wish-fulfillment” and “documentaries of social representation.”<sup>36</sup> Documentaries of wish-fulfillment is the term Nichols uses to describe fiction films. They capture our dreams, nightmares, and imaginations. Documentaries of social representation, on the other hand, attempt to document the way people encounter the real world. They often have a “truth claim” about the world in which we live. Each type of film is a documentary because it provides “evidence of the culture that produced it and reproduces the likenesses of the people who perform within it.”<sup>37</sup> Nichols also distinguishes between reproduction (what a documentary is not) and representation (what a documentary is). He explains:

We judge a reproduction by its fidelity to the original—its capacity to look like, act like, and serve the same purposes as the original. We judge a representation more by the

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<sup>35</sup> William Rothman, “The Filmmaker as Hunter: Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*,” *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, edited by Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998, 38.

<sup>36</sup> Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010, 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

nature of the pleasure it offers, the value of the insights or knowledge it provides, and the quality of the orientation of disposition, tone or perspective it instills.<sup>38</sup>

A documentary film is not merely catching and reproducing reality, it is representing a particular view of reality.

Carl Plantinga argues that a documentary film is marked as a film that contains “asserted veridical representation.”<sup>39</sup> He claims that the representations are asserted to be truthful and “reliable guide[s]” to the pro-filmic scene. His definition of documentary film is a film that is made in such a way that the audience accepts the ideas, images, and shots as approximations of what the actual pro-filmic events looked like. Documentary films, according to Plantinga, are films that “appear truthful.”<sup>40</sup> It is noteworthy that Plantinga did not say that documentaries are truthful, but simply that they appear truthful. Another key point from Plantinga, a point in which Nichols and most documentary theorists would agree, is that documentaries are asserted. An assertion necessarily implies an “asserter”—someone making a claim, positioning evidence, or attempting to change those around him or her. Documentary filmmakers have a particular point of view, an agenda, and vested interests in the subject of their films. These films should be viewed as constructions or arguments put together by the filmmaker.

Documentarian Renee Tajima-Peña reflects on early Asian American documentary filmmakers inclination to position themselves from within, or as Plantinga may say, “asserting” themselves: “The greatest achievement of the Asian American documentary may be its intimacy. Cameras rarely stray far from the subject, and there is little of the visual remove of a wide-angle

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<sup>38</sup> Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 20-21.

<sup>39</sup> Plantinga, “What a Documentary Is, After All,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63.2 (2005), 105.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 114.

lens, or the attitude of remove of cinema veritists and old-style broadcast journalists.”<sup>41</sup> The 1980s saw these filmmakers opening up the documentary form, incorporating narrative and non-documentary elements with documentary realism. Particularly, in attempts to answer the question: how to recreate the past now that the key players are no longer living? Some early efforts were awkward in execution. Later films were better in unifying the visual contrasts, 16mm footage with video without regards to any aesthetic logic. Tajima-Peña describes Arthur Dong’s *Sewing Woman* (1983) for successfully doing this as the elegance of the narrative text elevates the documentary realism of the film. In this case the protagonist may still be living, but her recollections are articulated through a fictionalized script based on oral histories. On the surface, *Sewing Woman* is a simple biographical story of filmmaker Arthur Dong’s mother, told ostensibly in her own words. However, the deft construction of filmed elements—archival footage in prewar China, family snapshots, and home movies—combined with the straight-talking eloquence of Lorraine, moves the film beyond the realm of oral history. Though a broader claim has not been made considering the contributions Asian American filmmakers have made in the realm of documentary filmmaking, the trend in mainstream film, especially in the early 21st century, aligns well with the direction of Asian American film. Jay Ruby discusses how the development of non-fiction films dealing with the filmmakers’ own family and their immediate world seems to represent a non-fiction genre which fits neither the traditional definition of the documentary nor the personal art film. The documentary film was founded on the western middle class need to explore, document, explain, understand and hence symbolically

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<sup>41</sup> Renee Tajima-Peña, “Moving the Image: Asian American Independent Filmmaking 1970-1990,” *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts*, edited by Russell Leong, Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center and Visual Communications, 1991, 23.

control the world. It has been an outsider looking in on a different culture, which is very clear in Flaherty's work. Ruby expresses ethical concerns about film:

I am convinced that filmmakers along with anthropologists have the ethical, political, aesthetic, and scientific obligations to be reflexive and self-critical about their work. Indeed, I would expand that mandate to include everyone who manipulates a symbolic system for any reason.<sup>42</sup>

Ruby continues by examining a diagram from Johannes Fabian: PRODUCER-PROCESS-PRODUCT. He asserts that most filmmakers present audiences with the product and exclude the other two, audiences are not supposed to see backstage as it destroys illusions and causes them to break their suspension of disbelief. But he also argues that unless audiences have knowledge of all three, a sophisticated and critical understanding of the product is virtually impossible. He argues for reflexivity, and that to be reflexive is to "structure a product in such a way that the audience assumes that the producer, the process of making, and the product are a coherent whole. The audience is made well aware of these relationships, and the producer deliberately reveals the underlying epistemological assumptions which caused them to formulate a set of questions in a particular way, to seek answers to those questions in a particular way, and finally to present their findings in a particular way. The philosophy of positivism has caused many social scientists and documentary filmmakers to hide themselves and their methods under the guise of objectivity.

Michael Rabiger describes two philosophies of approach to documentary filmmaking: observational mode, which means "observing life by using the camera like an anthropologist," and participatory mode, which permits a range of genres in which the director and crew interact with the participants and catalyze or even provoke verbal or physical action.<sup>43</sup> In participatory

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<sup>42</sup> Jay Ruby, "The Image Mirrored: Reflexivity and the Documentary Film," *Journal of the University Film Association* 29.4 (1977), 3.

<sup>43</sup> Rabiger, *Directing the Documentary*, 22-24.

filmmaking, directors can share their thoughts, doubts, and discoveries, and aspects of the filming process, with the audience and/or with the participants. “Direct cinema” or “cinema vérité”—titles given to the observational movement in documentary filmmaking—is the movement that resulted from the technological advances that allowed both the synchronous recording of sound and portability. This new technology led to the observational style in which filmmakers played little or no role in initiating the action, but simply allowed the action to take place in front of the camera. By acknowledging documentary as collaboration with participants, rather than an objective observation of them, the directors of participatory cinema could now catalyze or even provoke events, and probe for truth rather than simply await its appearance. “Unless the camera is actually hidden—ethically dubious at best—participants know it’s there and adjust accordingly.”<sup>44</sup> An observational film may make us feel like privileged observers, but we are seldom seeing life unmediated as such films imply. They appear so because an editor has subtracted everything that would break the illusion, such as people turning to the camera, or visibly adopting special behavior. Once the camera is present, dynamics shift, but there can also be a push towards transparency. The filmmaker has power in filming, in editing, in deciding what is made visible and what is not. When this process itself is made visible, it creates a truer representation as a particular view of reality to the audience, producing a more ethical product that brings attention to producer and process.

For social science research, similar considerations come into play. Rabiger insinuates that direct observational cinema is an attempt at objectivity or “using the camera like an anthropologist.” While he problematizes the objectivity of documentary film, this type of

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<sup>44</sup> Rabiger, *Directing the Documentary*, 53.

language implies that social science research is objective. However, challenges have been made to this type of thinking, perhaps even in a comparable manner to documentary film.<sup>45</sup>

The trend in documentary filmmaking coming into the 21st century, with the overwhelming success of Michael Moore's films and Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me*, has been towards filmmaker reflexivity and transparency. A shift in "shared authority" rather than journalistic objectivity, as suggested by Jay Ruby, allows subjects to represent themselves.<sup>46</sup> Asking their approval after they have reviewed the footage represents a definite shift in documentary voice and authority. The distance maintained by those favoring journalistic "objectivity" is abandoned in favor of a shared authority.

What documentary film allows is the ability to weave together fictional, non-fictional, and experimental methods to create a more subjective and first-person voice. Filmmaker Loni Ding has explored the use of devices like metaphors, surrealism, and tableaux to lend itself in presenting the historical past with this type of subjectivity and voice.<sup>47</sup> In *The Color of Honor* (1987-9), Ding uses the central metaphor of one uncovering a buried past. The film's opening image shows a first-generation Japanese father and his Nisei son digging in their California backyard, searching for a crate of Japanese possessions the family hastily buried on the eve of their forced removal by the U.S. government forty years earlier. She also uses surreal images to trigger an affective response, for example, a row of empty folding chairs seen set out in the midst

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<sup>45</sup> There exists a much more extensive conversation on these issues, however, it is out of scope for the focus of this thesis.

<sup>46</sup> Jay Ruby, "Speaking For, Speaking About, Speaking With, or Speaking Alongside: An Anthropological and Documentary Dilemma," *Visual Anthropology Review* 7.2 (1991), 55.

<sup>47</sup> Loni Ding, "Strategies of an Asian American Filmmaker," *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts*, edited by Russell Leong, Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center and Visual Communications, 1991, 59.



of nowhere. Ding's approach does not use re-creations or docu-drama, but stylized representations of subjective reflections and memories.<sup>48</sup>

On the issue of subjectivity and audience, Tajima-Peña states, "I try not to represent people's lives on film using a language and style that the subjects themselves cannot comprehend. That would be arrogance, pure and simple."<sup>49</sup> I do not think this is a point of view that the academy would adopt as the audience for scholarly work is other scholars. But it is a valid consideration in producing ethical representations. Every documentary film has an audience it is intending to reach. With her film *My America*, Tajima-Peña hoped that "Joe Sixpack in the American heartland, wherever that may be, would recognize our [Asian American] fundamental humanity in our lives, stories, humor, and tragedies."<sup>50</sup> That is precisely why her film is constructed around the narrative convention of tales from the road, with humor and irony mediating the nuance of social and political themes, and why Yuri Kochiyama and her husband are presented as a love story.

These considerations come into play in the making of *The Twelve Percent*. The film is a mixture of cinema vérité observational shooting along with talking head interviews with the two main characters as well as other community members and scholars. As documentary films are constructed subjective narratives, I leave visual and aural elements intact through editing that expose the producer (myself) and the process of filmmaking along with the product. I attempt to do this with subtlety and I allow my producer presence in the film to a point where it does not seem to distract or detract from the story I am trying to tell. By disrupting the mystique of

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<sup>48</sup> Ding, "Strategies of an Asian American Filmmaker," 59.

<sup>49</sup> Renee Tajima-Pena, "No Mo Po Mo and Other Tales of the Road." *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*. Eds. Darrell Y. Yamamoto and Sandra Lu. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000, 245.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 253.

filmmaking, viewers can discern that this is a specific narrative about a particular pair of Samoan American students though parallels and patterns can be inferred more broadly. The film is able to provide a more intimate lens into the lives of Samoan American students that goes beyond the faceless statistics and numbers. However, I am also faced with questions such as: how am I representing Scott and Tiny Bubbles? How did my initial research questions impact how I conducted my interviews with them or the way in which I edit? Would providing my own narration make my intentions even clearer? My preference is that the narrative is driven by Scott and Tiny Bubbles. My representation of them includes screening various iterations of the film for them to provide feedback in how they are represented, engaging in what Jay Ruby calls “shared authority.” Ultimately, the difficulty in the project is in creating cinematic interest and appeal while being truthful to my subjects’ stories and ethical in my approach.

### ***Story and Characters***

Tiny Bubbles Aranda hails from Carson, California, a city located south of Los Angeles with one of the largest populations of Pacific Islanders in the area.<sup>51</sup> She is a senior at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) majoring in Sociology with intentions of becoming a nurse. A graduate of Carson High School, she is one of the few Pacific Islander students to successfully matriculate directly into UCLA through Pacific Islander Education and Retention (PIER).<sup>52</sup> PIER is ran by Pacific Islands Student Association (PISA) and the UCLA

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<sup>51</sup> *A Community of Contrasts: Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in California, 2014*, 39.

<sup>52</sup> To clarify, PIER participants have gone on to attend other colleges and universities besides UCLA. Due to financial constraints, some PIER students opt to attend community college before transferring to a four-year university which has included UCLA. For a more extensive study on PIER, see Natasha Saelua, “PIER Through A Critical Lens: An Evaluation of a Student-Initiated, Student-Run Outreach Program” (master’s thesis, University of California Los Angeles, 2012).

Community Programs Office. But her time at UCLA has had its share of struggles. For instance, in sophomore year, Tiny Bubbles was placed on academic probation.

From the neighboring Wilmington, California, Scott Olomanu is a UCLA fifth-year student majoring in Sociology and minoring in Asian American Studies with intentions of becoming a social worker. His village affiliations are Fagasa (mother) and Vatia (father). He attended Phineas Banning High School in Wilmington. At present, Olomanu works for CPO and outreaches through PIER to Pacific Islander high school students in the Los Angeles Harbor area weekly, however, he has faced his own struggles with retention and was dismissed from UCLA twice. During those times, he felt family pressure to join the military or obtain employment at a local oil refinery, but managed to return to his studies at UCLA.

Why have these students, embodiments of the hopes and dreams of community mobility, struggled? Possible answers arise through examining the lack of academic and financial support for first generation college students and the type of schooling they had access to in preparation for college. Both Tiny Bubbles and Scott held jobs while attending school full time, and attended high schools that perform academically on the lower end for Los Angeles Unified School District.<sup>53</sup> But by creating their own support network on campus through other Pacific Islander students in PISA and grounding their cultural identity through local dance troupe Tupulaga, Scott and Tiny Bubbles have put themselves on track to graduate. Scott is applying to Master's in Social Work programs while Tiny Bubbles plans to take a year off before pursuing a Master's degree in Nursing.

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<sup>53</sup> See <http://www.greatschools.org> for comparative data.

Given the proximity of the students' activities, the film splits its time between UCLA in Westwood, California, and the Los Angeles Harbor area, specifically in Carson, Long Beach, and Wilmington.

## **V. Audience, Impact, Dissemination**

### ***Audience and Impact***

*The Twelve Percent* is produced in a style intended to appeal to all audiences. However, its specific target audiences consist of (1) Pacific Islander youth to validate their own experiences and encourage college recruitment, and (2) the academic community to bring attention to the challenging hardships Samoan American students face in college. Its broader target audience consists of Asian American and Pacific Islander communities as well as individuals concerned with higher education and the Pacific diaspora.

### ***Dissemination***

*The Twelve Percent* will initially be screened for participants, their families and friends, along with other film supporters involved at University of California Los Angeles with additional screenings held in the Los Angeles Harbor Region. It will be submitted to roughly ten to twelve local and global film festivals, including CAAMFest (San Francisco), Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, Sacramento Asian Pacific Film Festival, SD Asian Film Festival, Asian American International Film Festival (New York), Hawaii International Film Festival, Austin Asian American Film Festival, Pacific International Documentary Film Festival (Tahiti), Pasifika Film Fest (Australia), AFI DOCS (Washington, DC), and New Zealand International Film Festival. After its festival run, the film will be distributed online through digital platforms

such as Vimeo and YouTube and made available to high school and college classrooms.

Outreach to high schools with large concentrations of Pacific Islander students, such as Carson High School, Banning High School, and Long Beach Polytechnic High School, will be targeted in that effort.

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