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Looking Back at Samoa: History, Memory, and the Figure of Mourning in Yuki Kihara's *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*

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Abstract

Samoa Japanese artist Yuki Kihara's photographic series *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (2013) focuses on sites of current and historical significance in Samoa. In taking on the title of French artist Paul Gauguin's 1897 work, Kihara signals her desire to engage with the history of representation of the Pacific in Western art through dialogue with Gauguin and the history of colonial photography. Casting herself as a version of Thomas Andrew's *Samoa Half Caste* (1886), a figure in Victorian mourning dress, she directs the viewer's gaze and invites all to share her acts of mourning at these sites. The literal meaning of the title also indicates how the series engages with history via the Samoan concept of *vā*, collapsing time in space, to produce an understanding of both the country's present and the potential future such history invites.

Keywords

Yuki Kihara – photography – Samoa – Pacific – *vā* – Thomas Andrews – Gauguin

In her 2013 photographic series *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Yuki (Shigeyuki) Kihara explores the potential of photography to condense a multitude of complex histories, stories, and allusions into a single

material object. The series of eighteen black-and-white photographs focuses on sites of historical and contemporary significance throughout Samoa. These include churches, colonial buildings and memorials, traditional *fale* and the bush, as well as scenes of colonial predations and natural disasters. The photographs do not merely represent, immortalise, or memorialise these locations and their multi-faceted histories, but transform them into a series of singular but interconnected images which trace the complex social, economic, political, and cultural factors at play in Samoa, historically and in the present day. In each photograph, Kihara appears as a woman in Victorian mourning dress, Salomé, who is witness and ghost, both mourning at these sites, and haunting each place and its history.

Kihara confronts and refigures narratives and images of the Pacific and forces the reconsideration of the history of Samoa and its representation in artistic practice by engaging with traditions of colonial and Victorian photography, together with European and Samoan visual art and storytelling traditions. This article will explore ways in which Kihara comments on and refigures these traditions and how she invites viewers to share in her act of decolonial mourning through the figure of Salomé. As a literal interpretation of the series' title suggests, the photographs of *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* look back to Samoa's past in order to understand the country's present, and the potential futures such histories invite. In this article, we use the term "decolonial" in the broad sense of dismantling the technologies of colonialism. This refers not so much to the act of dismantling national colonial political administrations, in which, as Tracey Banivanua Mar points out, "the nation, as the primary formation of decolonised independence, has proven inadequate."¹ Rather, decolonisation refers to broader "Indigenous networks of decolonisation as they surfaced and coalesced in expressive actions of protest, artistic and literary media, or written and spoken petitions, speeches and articles" that have linked "cultures of decolonisation in the Pacific."² Decolonisation resists the discourse and strategies of colonisation while asserting Indigenous epistemologies and practices. Accordingly, we note how Kihara draws time and space together to ensure continuity rather than separation as a mourning practice, thereby honouring Samoan understandings of grief that emphasise ongoing connection.³

1 Tracey Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific: Indigenous Globalisation and the Ends of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016), 14.

2 *Ibid.*, 15.

3 Byron Malaela Sotiata Seiuli, "Ua tafea le tau'ofe: Samoan Cultural Rituals through Death and Bereavement Experiences" (PhD diss., University of Waikato, 2015), 66.

The Artist

As an artist and performer, Kihara has experienced a rapid rise in the Aotearoa New Zealand art world. With a background in fashion, the interdisciplinary nature of her work was soon apparent; subsequent works branched out into collage, photography, curation, performance, and dance, often combining several of these in a practice that displays a precise aesthetics with a perceptive decolonising political sensibility. Winning the Paramount Prize in the Wallace Awards in 2012,⁴ Kihara now has a well-established international reputation, with her works displayed in galleries across the world, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, and the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. As a *fa'afafine* of Japanese and Samoan descent undertaking most of her practice in Aotearoa, New Zealand, Kihara is always cognisant of difference and of her status as a member not only of a diasporic minority but also of other marginalised identities relating to her gender, sexuality, and race.⁵ Kihara notes the disparities in her heritage, claiming that though she herself is situated “at the intersection between Asia and Pacific,” globally the Pacific has been overlooked in favour of Asia, and she aligns herself more with the Pacific.⁶ Pamela Rosi suggests that these potentially conflicting identities “are a stimulating source for keeping [Kihara’s] vibrant art true to her own *vā*-space—the space-in-between.”⁷

4 Adam Gifford, “Shigeyuki Kihara: A Lament for the Lost,” *New Zealand Herald*, 8 September 2012, accessed 15 October 2015.

5 *Fa'afafine* is a Samoan term which translates as “effeminate man” (R. W. Allardice, *A Simplified Dictionary of Modern Samoan*, Auckland: Polynesian Press, 1989, 10). An inclusive descriptor, it is used by those born biologically male who perform gender and sexuality in ways that go well beyond dominant masculinities, sometimes being considered and passing as female. *Fa'afafine* are an integral part of the Samoan islands and their diasporic communities, though many now suffer persecution and discrimination due to colonisation and Christianity, as Kihara notes explicitly (Katerina M. Teaiwa, “An Interview with Interdisciplinary Artist Shigeyuki Kihara,” *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 27, 2011). *Fa'afafine* identities do not neatly align with those known elsewhere as “gay” or “transgender,” though some *fa'afafine* may also identify with those terms. There is no clear equivalent in English. *Fa'afafine* has connections with identities in other Polynesian societies, such as *fakaleiti* (Tonga), *mahu* (Tahiti), and *akava'ine* (Cook Islands), among others, and also with two-spirit identities in Native American societies.

6 Teaiwa, “An Interview.”

7 Pamela Rosi, “Shigeyuki Kihara: Subverting Dusky Maidens and Exotic Tropes of Pacific Paradise,” *ArtAsiaPacific* 51 (2007): 72.

In each of the photographs, Kihara's Salomé appears as a silhouette of a woman in Victorian mourning dress. Pictured from the back, she draws the viewer's gaze into the scene and literally enacts the series' interest in looking back at Samoa's history. As Linda Tyler suggests, this figure is a general cipher for loss and grief in Samoa⁸; she is witness and ghost, mourning and haunting sites of "political, historical and cultural importance in present-day Samoa."⁹ Salomé is a figure with a history of her own. As a refiguring of Thomas Andrew's 1886 photograph *Samoan Half Caste (Views in the Pacific Islands)*,¹⁰ she recalls nineteenth-century Pacific photography, a practice that bore witness and contributed to both the transformation of the region under European colonisation, and the construction of the myth of the Pacific as an untouched paradise. She also gestures towards the Victorian traditions of portrait and mourning photography. A figure who also appears in Kihara's *Taualuga: The Last Dance* (2006), *Siva in Motion* (2012), *Galū Afi: Waves of Fire* (2012), and *Dance of the Seven Veils* (2014), Salomé alludes to the *femme fatale* of the biblical story and the heroine of Oscar Wilde's infamous 1892 play. As Herodias' page states of Wilde's Salomé, "she is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. You would fancy she was looking for dead things."¹¹ Like Wilde's heroine, Kihara's Salomé is a ghost of the past "rising from a tomb," and a mourner "looking for dead things"¹² at sites of colonisation and violence in Samoan colonial and recent history; she typifies the artist's interest in looking back at, mourning, and remembering Samoa's past. Implicit within this, however, is Kihara's interrogation and deconstruction of colonial and neo-colonial ways of looking at the Pacific.

As a reference to the artist's earlier work, Salomé connects *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* with Kihara's broader decolonising art practice. In contrast to the "dusky maidens" of colonial photography—a trope intended to suggest the desirability and availability of

8 Linda Tyler, "From the Collection," *The University of Auckland News for Staff*, April 2014.

9 "Exhibition Text," *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Milford Galleries, 2013, accessed 15 October 2015, <https://www.milfordgalleries.co.nz/dunedin/exhibitions/328-Yuki-Kihara-Where-do-we-come-from-What-are-we-Where-are-we-going>.

10 Yuki Kihara, "Artist Statement," *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Milford Gallery, 2013.

11 Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*, in *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, ed. Richard Allen Cave (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 69.

12 Ibid.

Polynesian women to the white male¹³—and the naked women of Gauguin’s controversial Tahitian art, Salomé is clad in black taffeta. Unlike these women and the Salomé of Bible and drama, she refuses to perform seductively for the viewer.¹⁴ In doing so, she “denies the colonial fantasy of the sexually provocative native. She is more a symbol of time than of the body.”¹⁵ In each photograph, Salomé is represented not as a focal subject, but as a proxy for the viewer. She surveys these significant sites, points of historical and continued contact between Polynesian and *palagi* (foreigner), and invites the viewer to look with her, rather than at her. Disrupting the lines of power that connect the subject to the viewer in colonial photography in this way, Salomé poses the formative questions (“What are we? Where are we going?”), looking beyond these historical scenes to the future.

The title of the series is not a broad gesture to the past. In its title and scope, it engages with Paul Gauguin’s 1897 *D’où Venons Nous / Que Sommes Nous / Où Allons Nous* (*Where Do We Come From / What Are We / Where Are We Going*). However, Kihara’s allusion is more than a straightforward borrowing of the title, cultural currency, and provocation of Gauguin’s famous Tahitian work. Gauguin is a contentious figure in contemporary Pacific cultures. Like many of his European contemporaries, his art and writings represent a myth of the Pacific as an “ancient untouched world” peopled by semi-naked and sexually available “dusky maidens.”¹⁶ In Samoan writer Sia Figiel’s novel *Where We Once Belonged* (1996), Siniva, the art historian, village fool, and prophet, sits in the marketplace in Apia and shouts at tourists to “go back to where you came from you fucking ghosts. Gauguin is dead! There is no paradise.”¹⁷ In declaring Gauguin’s death in a figurative Barthian sense, Siniva and Figiel free contemporary Samoa from this past and the persistence of its myths of the Pacific. Siniva’s reference to Gauguin and the ghosts—both literal and figurative—of colonialism, has obvious synergies with Kihara’s *Where Are We Going?* In referring to the tourists as ghosts, Siniva personifies them as spectral figures, incapable of relinquishing Samoa’s colonial past. Her position in the novel as an art historian emphasises the importance of contemporary visual art in confronting and refiguring this myth.

13 Caroline Vercoe, “I Am My Other, I Am My Self: Encounters With Gauguin in Polynesia,” *The Australasian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 13, no. 1 (2013): 113.

14 Tyler, “From the Collection.”

15 Whitney Tassie, “Shigeyuki Kihara,” *Salt* 8 (2013), accessed 8 January 2016.

16 Lisa Taouma, “Gauguin Is Dead ... There Is No Paradise,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 25, no. 1 (2004).

17 Sia Figiel, *Where We Once Belonged* (Auckland: Pasifika Press, 1996), 187.

The Original Work by Gauguin

The questions posed by Kihara's work *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* can be interpreted as crucial existential ones of the *fin de siècle*, a moment in which the high point of colonialism in the Pacific coincided with European anxieties about degeneration and the coming of the twentieth century. However, as Clement Pito informed Deborah A. Elliston, they are also central questions to Polynesian epistemologies:

The questions in the painting—who are you, where do you come from, where are you going—those are our questions, they're our questions. But [Gauguin] put them in the painting and generalized them (...) The questions in his painting, they're the questions people would ask him when he came here. They're the questions a Polynesian would ask any stranger, anyone they don't know (...) One asks, "O vai 'oe?" [Who are you?], "Nohea roa mai 'oe?" [Where do you come from?], "Te haere 'oe hea?" [Where are you going?]. These are the first questions you ask (...) when you're walking along the path and you meet someone you don't know. (...) And he put them in his painting, and he generalized the questions (...) he changed the questions. (...) One asks, "Where are you going?" and he changed it to "Where are we going?" One asks, "Who are you?" and he changed it to "Who are we?" (...) One asks, "Where are you from?" and he asked, "Where are we from?"¹⁸

In taking these three questions as the title of her photographic collection, Kihara reappropriates them from the European source and reframes them once again within Polynesian artistic practice and life. They reference heritage, displacement and diaspora, and the future. The figure of the mourning Salomé looks back in time ("Where do we come from?"), straight ahead ("What are we?"), and off into the distance ("Where are we going?").

In the work undertaken during his time in Tahiti and the Marquesas, Gauguin sought to escape Modernity and yet at the same time ushered it in through his primitivist search for perception and meaning in "remote and unspoiled lands."¹⁹ Most scholars interpret his work as Eurocentric and highly introspective, framed by the artist's biography and his documented preoccupation with

18 Quoted in Deborah A. Elliston, "Geographies of Gender and Politics: The Place of Difference in Polynesian Nationalism," *Cultural Anthropology* 15, no. 2 (2000): 171–2.

19 Albert Boime, *Revelation of Modernism: Responses to Cultural Crises in Fin-de-Siècle Painting* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 135.

his own mortality.²⁰ As Caroline Vercoe notes, however, “Gauguin’s legacy shows no sign of waning; his phantasm continues to hover over Tahiti as well as wider Polynesia,”²¹ provoking critique, reaction, and inspiration for Pacific artists and writers. The symbolic elements of Gauguin’s original painting stand in summation of the themes and style of his broader oeuvre,²² with many of the figures and tableaux also appearing in his earlier paintings.²³ In this way, Gauguin’s work represents the collapsing of time, both personal and historic, into a single image and moment, an effect which Kihara’s photographic series also achieves.

The Figure of Salomé and Thomas Andrew’s *Samoan Half Caste*

Like Gauguin’s figures, Kihara’s Salomé has both Pacific and European identities and histories. As previously noted, her primary history lies in Andrew’s photograph *Samoan Half Caste*, one of many similar portraits included in *Views in the Pacific Islands* (1886).²⁴ It is worth paying some attention to this figure, as not only is she Kihara’s recurring muse, but she also exemplifies how the Pacific has always been diasporic. *Samoan Half Caste* (fig. 1) is a portrait of a woman seated sideways on a simple wooden chair. She is dressed in a gown of dark silk taffeta and figured silk in the *cuirass* style fashionable throughout Europe and its empires during the late 1880s. On her left hand are two rings of shell, contrasting with the Western fashions of her dress. Her hair is pulled straight back and adorned with a carved tortoiseshell comb, worn in local (rather than Victorian) fashion. The back of her left hand is marked with what appear to be Marshallese tattoos of stripes and circles, and she is holding

20 Vercoe, “I Am My Other, I Am My Self,” 120.

21 Ibid., 105.

22 A fuller account of these can be found in Boime, *Revelation of Modernism*; Wayne Anderson, *Gauguin’s Paradise Lost* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972) and especially in George T. M. Shackelford, “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?,” in *Gauguin Tahiti*, ed. George T. M. Shackelford and Claire Frèches-Thory (Boston: MFA Publication, 2004): 166–203.

23 Kihara’s *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* can also be said to summarise her work more generally. The figure of Salomé appears in much of her recent practice and together these works, both visual and performative, interrogate colonial narratives of Pacific history and culture. The recurrence of this figure builds up extra-textual narratives of decolonising approaches to art and history.

24 Thomas Andrew, *Views in the Pacific Islands* (1886), The Thomas Andrew Collection, gift of Thomas & Edith Gillan, 1994; CC-BY-NC-ND licence, Te Papa (AL.000266), 1994.



FIGURE 1 *Thomas Andrews, Samoan Half Caste, from the album Views in the Pacific Islands, 1886, 10 cm × 9.5 cm, black and white photograph, albumen silver print. The Thomas Andrews Collection. Gift of Thomas & Edith Gillan, 1994. CC-BY-NC-ND licence, Te Papa (AL.000266), 1994.*

a folding fan in her right hand with the index finger of her left resting against it. She is looking directly at Andrews and, by extension, at the viewer, thereby disrupting the dominant power relationship of colonial photography in which the sitter is rendered passive and exotic by the active gaze of the photographer. A close examination of the composition, lighting, and details of the image within the context of Andrews work suggests that it was taken in the Marshall Islands rather than Samoa. The mat backdrop with its shadows, together with the wooden chair, are identical to those in two other portraits of women in the volume, both taken in Majuro. This, in combination with her tattoo, suggests that the subject of *Samoan Half Caste* is, in fact, Marshallese Samoan, not European Samoan, as has previously been assumed. Like Kihara's *Salomé*, *Samoan Half Caste* portrays a diasporic figure. Her dress is a combination of Victorian and Pacific styles, and her heritage both Marshallese and Samoan. That she is in Majuro is indicative of her own or her parents' movement between islands, and as tattooing was often a sign of rank in the Marshalls, it is likely that she is of high status.²⁵ Certainly her confidence would indicate this, with her manner of self-presentation representing the complex and continued contact between local and European cultural and symbolic systems and histories throughout the nineteenth century. In her recreation and refashioning of this figure, Kihara takes on and contributes to these complex historical and cultural signifiers. Connections between Samoa and the Marshall Islands were cemented in 1885 (the year prior to this photograph being taken) when Germany annexed the islands, making it a protectorate in 1886.²⁶ With its copra production, the Marshalls became "the major trade intersection in the northern Pacific,"²⁷ and Germany left the main task of administration to those companies running plantations there, the same companies that dominated trade in Samoa.²⁸

25 Alexander Spoehr, *Majuro: A Village in the Marshall Islands* (Chicago: Chicago Natural History Museum, 1949), 59. In slight contradiction to this, Spennemann claims that only finger tattoos were signs of high status in women, and hand tattoos were more common. *Samoan Half Caste* appears only to wear hand (not finger) tattoos, but her bearing marks her status, if nothing else. Dirk H. R. Spennemann, *Tattooing in the Marshall Islands* (Honolulu: Bess, 2009), 68–69.

26 Gerd Hardach, "Defining Separate Spheres: German Rule and Colonial Law in Micronesia," in *European Impact and Pacific Influence: British and German Colonial Policy in the Pacific Islands and the Indigenous Response*, ed. H. J. Hiery and J. M. MacKenzie (London: IB Taurus, 1997), 231–32.

27 Francis X. Hezel, *Strangers in Their Own Land* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), 45.

28 *Ibid.*, 45–55.

Inspired by Andrew's agential image of the Pasifika woman whose very heritage speaks of mobile Oceanic identities, Kihara's Salomé is at once a figure of continuity over the series and the history it represents, and a witness and mourner of the continual historical change that these sites have seen. Maia Nuku writes of the "apocalyptic landscapes" of the series, which feature "key sites of encounter, union, disaggregation, growth, abundance, violence."²⁹ Each image asks its viewers to consider the future in the light of Samoan colonial history while also acknowledging the realities of contemporary life, especially the impact of natural disasters that have occurred in the immediate past. It thereby counters and resists instances of colonial and neo-colonial predation with an insistence on memorialising them. This is done through a figure in Victorian mourning dress, arguably a hyper-colonial image in the tropics, where to wear such clothing is itself a form of lamentation.

Select Images from the Series

The series was shot in January 2013, immediately after the devastation of Tropical Cyclone Evan in the previous month, and this context permeates each photograph with an awareness that life in the Pacific is changing in unpredictable ways.³⁰ In fact, the cyclone was still active and threatened the shoot, as it seemed about to return to Samoa. The new order seen in *After Cyclone Evan, Lelata* (2013) (fig. 2) is one in which climate change makes damaging—if regular—events like cyclones so much more destructive than they have ever been. The reality, now that humans have ushered in the Anthropocene,³¹ is that cyclones are not only more common but more severe.³² The cyclone that devastated Fiji in February 2016, TC Winston, resulted in at least forty-four deaths and left around 35,000 homeless.³³ It was Category Five, and considered the

29 Maia Nuku, "Standing on the Edge of the Abyss: Shigeyuki Kihara, Catalyst for Change," *Broadsheet* 44, no. 3 (2016): 10.

30 Nina Seja, "The Past Is a Foreign Climate: Shigeyuki Kihara Meets the Anthropocene," *Art Monthly* 285 (2015): 32.

31 Paul J. Crutzen, "The 'Anthropocene,'" in *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene: Emerging Issues and Problems*, ed. Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Krafft (Berlin: Springer, 2006), 13–18.

32 P. J. Webster et al., "Changes in Tropical Cyclone Number, Duration, and Intensity in a Warming Environment," *Science* 309, no. 5742 (2005): 1846.

33 Lucy Thackray, "Death Toll in Fiji Rises to 44 With a 10-Month-Old Baby Among Those Presumed Dead After Catastrophic Cyclone Winston Tore Through the Country Wiping Out Whole Village," *Daily Mail Australia*, 25 February, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.com>.



FIGURE 2 *Yuki Kihara, After Cyclone Evan, Lelata, from the series Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?, 2013, 595 × 840 mm, Black and White photograph, c-print. Courtesy of the Artist and Milford Galleries Dunedin, New Zealand.*

most severe storm to occur in Fiji since modern records began. As Nina Seja suggests, “Kihara thus contributes to creating a new visual language of the aesthetics of the Anthropocene.”³⁴ Not only will cyclones as devastating as Evan and Winston occur, but diseases are more threatening as well, with dengue fever, chikungunya, and now zika virus on the rise because the changing climatic conditions allow for the spread of disease-bearing mosquitoes.³⁵ Though not directly addressed in these images, the major devastation threatening the Pacific, rising ocean levels, is nevertheless gestured to in images such as *Agelū i Tausi Catholic Church After Cyclone Evan, Mulivai Safata* (2013) (fig. 3). The action of water is a sign of this devastation; it is intimidating to human life and especially to human endeavour in its many forms. That this occurs in a church, which has become the bastion of Samoan life, is telling. The Anthropocene

co.uk/news/article-3463347/Death-toll-Fiji-rises-44-10-month-old-baby-presumed-dead-catastrophic-Cyclone-Winston-tore-country-wiping-village.html.

34 Seja, “The Past Is a Foreign Climate,” 32.

35 Sonia Altizer et al., “Climate Change and Infectious Diseases: From Evidence to a Predictive Framework,” *Science* 341, no. 6145 (2013): 514–519.



FIGURE 3 *Yuki Kihara*, *Agelu i Tausi Catholic Church After Cyclone Evan, Mulivai Safata*, from the series *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 2013, 595 × 840 mm, Black and White photograph, c-print. Courtesy of the Artist and Milford Galleries Dunedin, New Zealand.

threatens traditional and more recent Samoan life and culture, *fa'a Samoa*, because it changes the environment upon which such life depends, and indeed with which it is so interconnected.

Not only was the series shot just after Cyclone Evan, but it was also just “six months after the 50th anniversary of Samoan Independence.”³⁶ The path to that independence was long and strained, fuelled by the New Zealand colonial government’s pettiness and violence toward the principal organisation for independence, the Mau. Prior to New Zealand assuming colonial power from the Germans at the outbreak of WWI, Samoans had resisted the colonial incursions of other governments. Those with the most interest in Samoa—Germany, Britain, and the United States—had, through their resident consuls, largely ruled via a Samoan high title holder (described by these powers as the king) in an arrangement that came to be known as the Condominium,

36 Natalie Poland, “Undressing the Pacific,” *Shigeyuki Kihara: Undressing the Pacific. A Mid-Career Survey Exhibition* (Dunedin: Hocken Collections, 2013), 5.

brokered in Berlin in 1889.³⁷ The Samoans resisted this to the point of war but they were ultimately unsuccessful, as not only did the Europeans employ superior firepower but all three powers also played Samoan factions against each other, thereby entrenching their own power.³⁸ The country was divided following a further treaty negotiated in Berlin in 1899, with the US controlling the eastern islands and Germany the western ones. Samoan desire for independence did not, however, go away. By 1929 the Mau's leader, Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III, had returned from being banished by the New Zealand colonial government on the pretext that he failed to remove a hibiscus hedge he considered to be on his own land.³⁹ On 28 December 1929 New Zealand forces killed Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III with a single shot to the back after military police panicked during a protest. At least seven other Mau members died, and many more were injured when they were fired upon. This day is now known as Black Saturday in Samoa.⁴⁰

In her engagement with this moment in Samoa's history, Kihara also references the historical photographic record of the same site. Colonial photography in Samoa, mostly the work of a very small number of local or visiting photographers, was often put to contradictory purposes. Alison Nordström notes the ways in which just a few images took on lives of their own, being repurposed to reproduce Samoan women in particular, according to the dominant stereotypes of Polynesian women.⁴¹ These were by no means the only images of Samoa in circulation though, Max Quanchi records the diversity of subject matter in illustrated magazines in the early twentieth century.⁴² Many late nineteenth-century images, such as those of Alfred Burton in *The Camera in the Coral Islands*, present "an untroubled earthly paradise"⁴³ that

37 George Herbert Ryden, *The Foreign Policy of the United States in Relation to Samoa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), 551.

38 Malama Meleisea, *Making of Modern Samoa: Traditional Authority and Colonial Administration in the History of Western Samoa* (Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, 1987), 40.

39 "The Banishment of Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III," *New Zealand History*, 2 September 2014, accessed 19 October 2015, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/banishment-tupua-tamasese-lealofi-iii>.

40 "Black Saturday," *New Zealand History*, 2 September 2014, accessed 19 October 2015, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/politics/samoa/black-saturday>.

41 Alison Nordström, "Paradise Recycled: Photographs of Samoa in Changing Contexts," *Exposure* 28, no. 3 (1991–92): 6–15.

42 Max Quanchi, "The Imaging of Samoa in Illustrated Magazines and Serial Encyclopaedias in the Early 20th-Century," *The Journal of Pacific History* 41, no. 2 (2006): 207–217.

43 Poland, "Undressing the Pacific," 5.



FIGURE 4 Yuki Kihara, *Mau Headquarters, Vaimoso*, from the series *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 2013, 595 × 840 mm, *Black and White photograph, c-print*. Courtesy of the Artist and Milford Galleries Dunedin, New Zealand.

seemed ready for colonisation, especially in its depiction of young women. Alfred Tattersall was the only resident photographer to have made his living from his photography, chiefly through postcards and souvenir albums. Despite this, he also photographed images of Samoan life that did not conform to the dominant requirements of tourism. Though a firm New Zealand loyalist, he took several notable images of the Mau, including one of the leadership group at their headquarters just months before Tamasese and other Mau were murdered.⁴⁴ He also photographed the women's Mau, whose role became more important following Black Saturday. It is this image that Kihara specifically references in *Mau Headquarters, Vaimoso* (2013) (fig. 4). In Tattersall's image, four female leaders stand diffidently in relation to the camera, in front of the Mau building. Other women are at the edge of the frame but there are no men in sight, a hint of the loss of those who had died. A woman, just visible from within the building, looks out suspiciously, her affect encapsulating the mood

44 Peter Messenhöller and Alison Nordström, "Checklist of the Exhibition," *Picturing Paradise: Colonial Photography of Samoa, 1875 to 1925*, ed. Casey Blanton (Daytona, FL: Daytona Beach Community College, 1995): 105–131.

of the whole scene. They are a reluctant group, whatever the circumstances under which the image was captured. Kihara's image, on the other hand, is seen from further back. The scene is sombre, with the women gone and the sky overcast. Only Salomé stands as a silent, yet active, observer. Her presence reminds us that even though more than eighty years have passed, space concertinas time from the 1880s, through the 1920s, and into the present. This tendency to collapse time exemplifies the whole series, and encapsulates "a thoroughly Polynesian conceptual framework of space and time: viewers inhabit a privileged position alongside her, as she prepares to walk backwards into the uncertainty of the future."⁴⁵ Albert L. Refiti describes the Samoan concept of *vā* as an "exposition of affects and effects in the system of actions and behaviours that orders and produces subjects/objects in a Samoan social-cultural schema."⁴⁶ This understanding of relational space encapsulated in the notion *vā*,⁴⁷ with its accompanying imperative to care for such space, *teu le vā*, speaks of the cultural work this series accomplishes. Space is not empty, it is relational, and this relationality crosses time in ways that make demands of the present. While the Mau massacre occurred in the past, Salomé reminds us of its ongoing relevance, just as she does in images from the series at other Samoan historic sites. Her work of active mourning, of drawing attention to colonial predation, is indicative of Kihara's ongoing decolonising aesthetics.

Departure, Faleolo International Airport (2013) (fig. 5) is taken at night from outside the departure lounge, a place that evokes a range of issues in contemporary Samoan life, including emigration, tourism, and the cycle of short term labour in Australia and New Zealand. Unlike most places in the world, where airline curfews apply, many Pacific countries have airline schedules that include arrivals and departures that occur in the small hours of the morning. The airport is a place that can be extraordinarily busy, with overcrowded utility vehicles and trucks dispensing people and goods outside the departure area. It is rare to see anyone arriving alone, and most travellers leave with an *umu* box of freshly cooked food to take to deprived relatives overseas. Travel, for whatever purpose, is done in relation to community, and thereby is an act of *teu le vā*. Not only is the airport empty for Salomé, but she is alone, the whole scene functioning as an unlikely memorial to departures and families divided by

45 Nuku, "Standing on the Edge of the Abyss," 10.

46 Albert L. Refiti, "How the Tā-Vā Theory of Reality Constructs a Spatial Exposition of Samoan Architecture," *Heretic Papers in Pacific Thought*, alrx01-2013, http://www.academia.edu/3570169/How_the_Ta_-Va_theory_of_reality_constructs_a_spatial_exposition_of_Samoan_architecture.

47 Ibid., 10.



FIGURE 5 Yuki Kihara, *Departure, Faleolo International Airport*, from the series *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 2013, 595 × 840 mm, *Black and White photograph, c-print*. Courtesy of the Artist and Milford Galleries Dunedin, New Zealand.

place. The emigration which has occurred from this airport has had a profound impact on life in Samoa, as so many have left, but it has had even more impact on those who have departed for New Zealand, the US, and Australia. The airport is the scene of another kind of break in history, with Salomé as a ghost from the past, testing what effect this massive movement of people—more than a half of Samoans live overseas—has had on the nation. The phenomena of Australia and New Zealand issuing short term work visas for seasonal work has also had a profound effect on local and diasporic life. Some Pacific villages struggle to maintain their own agriculture and community life, with so many workers away for months at a time. Often the promised financial benefits do not come home to villages and families. Meanwhile, in remote rural areas in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, Pacific communities attempt to cling to the routines of home while undertaking demanding physical work that often does not pay well after expenses. Some of this work is organised illegally and therefore award wages are not paid. These elements make *Departure, Faleolo International Airport* (2013) an image of profound mourning. Salomé is focused on the interior, where travellers check in to leave. Its chiaroscuro, hinting at the double-sided nature of both emigration and tourism, is especially marked,



FIGURE 6 Yuki Kihara, *After Tsunami Galu Afi, Lalomanu*, from the series *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 2013, 595 × 840 mm, *Black and White photograph, c-print*. Courtesy of the Artist and Milford Galleries Dunedin, New Zealand.

with the light from inside the building just slightly illuminating the texture of her dress. This space has a further personal resonance for Kihara; her father was the engineer who worked on its construction.

Many elements present in other images in the series come together in *After Tsunami Galu Afi, Lalomanu* (2013) (fig. 6). Salomé stands on a beach, gazing away to the distance, which, because it is to the left, is beyond the range of the shot. In the context of the history of Pacific representation, a woman on a beach carries a range of signifiers, many of which this image dismisses before moving on to a more significant reflection on the present. Salomé's stance, and her gaze pointing the viewer to the ocean, is common in tourist promotions, where women—especially Polynesian women—are seen to speak of prelapsarian sexual freedom through the availability of their bodies to white men. The history of such representation is long and can be summarised as the “dusky maiden” trope, referred to earlier.⁴⁸ Other Pasifika artists have confronted this overdetermined history of representation, as has Kihara in earlier

48 Vercoe, “I Am My Other, I Am Myself,” 113.

works.⁴⁹ But this trope of the beach and its lone woman as white Western male fantasy is curtailed in its very evocation by Salomé's dress, stance, and affect. As Natalie Poland notes, "This photograph undresses the touristic images of Samoa found on postcards by replacing reclining 'native' beauties, bright sun and notational coconut palms with her character standing under an overcast sky."⁵⁰ Not only is the tone muted, but the choice to shoot in black and white drains the scene of touristic referents. In tourist advertising, colour—especially the blue of the Pacific Ocean together with pink hibiscus (often behind the ear of a Polynesian woman or otherwise graphically related to her)—functions in a metonymic way to reproduce taken-as-given meanings about the Pacific as a field of play for others.⁵¹ Their "startling monochrome"⁵² brushes aside and trivialises the touristic gaze, replacing it with a momentous and sombre present act of mourning that reaches back into the past as it contemplates the future. The title contains the evocative Samoan rendition of tsunami, *galu afi*, literally "waves of fire." It refers to the tsunami that occurred on 30 September 2009 which resulted in almost 200 deaths in Samoa, Tonga, and American Samoa. Prior to the tsunami, Lalomanu, on the southeastern tip of Upolu, was known as a tourist destination, a village with resorts that catered mostly to outsiders. It was hit by the full force of the tsunami, with most of Samoa's deaths occurring here;⁵³ its numerous tourist *fale* on the beach were destroyed, along with much of the village. Kihara's Lalomanu is a beach stripped of any sign of human habitation, local or otherwise. It seems that only Salomé is left to observe, remind, and mourn.

Not only is this beach the site of an extreme natural disaster, but "the beach" itself has a resonance in Pacific history. Apia was once predominantly known

49 This is especially apparent in the triptych *Fa'a fafine: In the Manner of a Woman* (2004–2005), in which Kihara not only confronts the male gaze, but overturns it in the revelation of the naked *fa'afafine* body, complete with the confrontation of a penis. See: Wolf, "Shigeyuki Kihara's *Fa'a fafine*," 28.

50 Poland, "Undressing the Pacific," 6.

51 Angela Tiatia's *Hibiscus Rosa Sinensis* (2014) collapses the imaginary around both flower and woman to present the woman with the hibiscus flower in her mouth, covering much of her face. The phallic nature of the hibiscus stamen can be taken to stand for the penis of the white male tourist, ever absent from the shot, but present in the implied desire of the viewer.

52 Nuku, "Standing on the Edge of the Abyss," 10.

53 Lanuola Tufufia and Jason Brown, "Lalomanu Residents in Samoa Remember 2009 Tsunami," *Pacific Islands Report*. From *Samoa Observer*, 30 September 2013, accessed 14 September 2015, <http://www.pidp.org/pireport/2013/October/10-01-05.htm>.

locally as “the beach,” and this term came to stand for the place of Euro-American contact, where the new hybrid societies of the Pacific grew up in the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ It was the place of local and non-islander interaction, a “contact zone” where a multitude of trades, willing and otherwise, occurred. First trades often involved bodies as well as hogs and fruit, and while Cook and other explorers depicted this as consensual—at least in official accounts⁵⁵—a closer examination of both ship’s journals and Pacific cosmologies complicates this picture considerably.⁵⁶ Later, the beach was crossed for blackbirding to occur. It was a site where trickery, kidnap, and accompanying violence resulted in thousands of islanders being transported to South America, Australia, and other islands in the Pacific to work on primarily Western-owned enterprises.⁵⁷ The beach could be a place of chicanery, momentarily changing people’s lives. Above all, it became a place of change as well as of exchange, a liminal space between cultures that ultimately developed its own culture, though this was not to the liking of all locals. When the overseer of Robert Louis Stevenson’s Vailima estate, Henry Simele, decided to return home to the island of Savai’i, he gave as the reason for his departure: “I begin to grow weary of the white men on the beach.”⁵⁸ It was also the place where some mixed-race children of Europeans and Americans established themselves as the new commercial and political elites when they inherited their expatriate fathers’ commercial interests.⁵⁹ Rather than a playground for tourists, European contact on the beach often came as a slow tsunami that swept through local societies, leaving their debris on the sand. Salomé is witness to the progress of that event; she mourns over it, as a sentinel on the hybrid space of the beach, but she also looks beyond it. Salomé’s gaze leads us beyond the frame, off to the left beyond

54 Mandy Treagus, “Crossing the Beach: Samoa, Stevenson and ‘The Beach at Falesa,’” *Literature Compass* 11, no. 5 (2014): 312–320.

55 Serge Tcherkézoff, “A Reconsideration of the Role of Polynesian Women in Early Encounters with Europeans: Supplement to Marshall Sahlins’ Voyage around the Islands of History,” in *Oceanic Encounters: Exchange, Desire, Violence* ed. Margaret Jolly et al. (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2009), 114.

56 See Anne Salmond, *Aphrodite’s Island: The European Discovery of Tahiti* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Tcherkézoff, “A Reconsideration,” 113–159.

57 Tracey Banivanua Mar, *Violence and Colonial Dialogue: The Australia-Pacific Labor Trade* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007); Jennifer M. Y. Carter, *Painting the Islands Vermillion: Archibald Watson and the Brig Carl* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999).

58 Graham Balfour, Diary, 1894, Entry: Wednesday 10 August 1892. Item 4, Papers of Graham Balfour, MS 9700, Manuscripts (National Library of Scotland).

59 Treagus, “Crossing the Beach,” 312–320.

the horizon, potentially to the future, which is likewise out of shot. The scene is speculative; there is no clear resolution of the elements raised by the image, but sea and sky are both calm, as is Salomé.

Salomé and the Future

Salomé performs a visual function in the series, in that she directs our gaze as viewers. She shows us where to look while acting as a protagonist in the scene. Kihara was inspired by one of Dante's nineteenth-century illustrators, Gustave Doré and his practice of positioning an observing figure or figures toward the foreground or centre to direct the viewer's gaze, a practice also seen in touristic promotional visuals.⁶⁰ The landscape is large and thereby epic, the scene of momentous events, and the individual less significant but opening our way into the scene. Despite drawing inspiration from the woman in Andrew's photograph who looked in direct address at her viewer, this Salomé is always turned away and never personalised, allowing her to fulfil a variety of roles at the same time. She is a witness to these events, sorrows, and injustices. Daniel Michael Satele has linked her with Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History" who enabled Benjamin to think "about history without becoming complicit in the power dynamics of his era."⁶¹ She is a way of entering history as well as the scene: "If Benjamin, with his angel, posits a figure who views the past *without an identity* informed by history, Kihara similarly posits Salomé as an observer of history who is irreducible to any actual person."⁶² Salomé asks for the viewer's deep attention, as Doré does in the Dante illustrations. Poland speaks of "Kihara's interventionist approach"⁶³ while Nuku describes her as a "catalyst for change."⁶⁴ There is an activist element to these images in their call to the viewer to seek, know, and acknowledge the past and present reality of these sites as well as a meditative quality to them. They soothe as well as confront, and in this role Salomé comes closer to her name's original meaning: peace. In this guise, Salomé is an angel in the more traditional sense, less haunting than soothing, doing more than the work of mourning. Instead, she blesses

60 Kihara, "Artist Statement."

61 Daniel Michael Satele, "Shigeyuki Kihara: Dark Angel of History," *Tautai* June (2013), accessed 14 September 2015, https://issuu.com/tautaiapacificartstrust/docs/tautai_june_2013_web_pdf?workerAddress=ec2-54-227-15-98.compute-1.amazonaws.com, 1.

62 *Ibid.*, 3.

63 Poland, "Undressing the Pacific," 4.

64 Nuku, "Standing on the Edge of the Abyss," 10.

these scenes of destruction and sadness, bringing closure as well as hope for the future.

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