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Tiki Kitsch, American Appropriation, and the Disappearance of the Pacific Islander Body

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Tiki kitsch is often mistaken for Polynesian art, but is a European American visual art form originating after World War II in Los Angeles at *Trader Vic's* and other Hollywood bars, based on appropriation of religious sculptures of Tiki a Polynesian deity and ancestor figure. The *moai* of Rapanui (Isla de Pascua, Easter Island) are the most known sculpture form appropriated and altered by tiki kitsch into tiki mugs, etc.

One of the first manifestations of European appropriation, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, by Pablo Picasso, influenced by African, Oceania, and Native American forms, or one might say, by a tribal and sculptural aesthetic from religious objects, was the first influential form of such appropriated imagery. By its production, it set the stage for European appropriation of non-European imagery, it made such appropriation part of the culture of Europe and America.

After Greenberg's famous analysis of kitsch in terms of aesthetics, Art critic James Gaywood, reasserted the question of kitsch in terms of market. (Gaywood 1997) Here Picasso and cultural appropriation were supplanted by Marcel Duchamp and the readymade. The products of art became completely non-native on all fronts, the world so reflected was post-cultural. In that sense, cultural appropriation was no longer an aesthetic, it was a commodity for production, and as much as possible, production by machines. The form of such commodity, of Pacific Islander cultures, was highly variable, from a 17th century English play by John Clarke, to Hollywood films beginning with Robert Flaherty's *Moana*, and F.W. Murnau's *Tabu*, to household utensils like the tiki mug on sale on the internet.

These narratives and objects about the Pacific Islands were in fact about the West itself. Western hegemony was no longer just active, it was foundational, it was the world in this belief system, in the aesthetics that reflected such belief and such an economy. The idea of a heroic West, became naturalized like the western passage of the sun, after the historical wave that once bore it forward had passed. But in this post-racial, post-cultural world, the Pacific Islands remain colonized to a large extent, beach destinations for global tourists, highly militarized in covert ways, while tiki kitsch is a sign of the invisibility of its people.

In contemporary art, African-British conceptual artist Yinka Shonibare's tableaux of mannequins wearing examples of so-called traditional African cloth, addresses its misidentification as a native cultural form as these cloths were made in South Asia according to European market controls. In Polynesia, the Aloha Shirt similarly was made from cloth designed and produced in East Asia, not by Pacific Islander visual or material cultures. In various ways, such as thru the appropriation of non-Western tribal art forms into Western fine art, thru the kitsch alteration of form and meaning into abject commodities, and thru the misidentification of imported non-native commodities as native, the non-Western body itself is misrepresented

leading to its disappearance in representation. Polynesian bodies, once illusive objects of desire in 18th and 19th century Western philosophy, literature, and fine art, from Loti to Melville to Gauguin, became abject objects, signs of colonized defeat, religious failure, and moral decay. These mythologies of inner decay masked the moral failures of Western imperialist histories. For instance, the myth of a vainglorious downfall in Easter Island culture masked the history of enslavement of the population of Easter Island to Chilean mines; and the myth of Aloha spirit in Hawaii masked the takeover of the Hawaiian Kingdom, imprisonment of the Hawaiian Queen Lili'uokalani, and Native Hawaiian protests against American colonization and statehood. In the light of these major historical events for Pacific Islanders, Western historical consciousness substitutes the darkness of images of tiki mugs and Hollywood movies. In my poem Tiki Manifesto, I express the much different relationship Pacific Islanders have to tiki kitsch and what it represents:

TIKIMANIFESTO

Tiki mug, tiki mug
My face, my mother's face, my father's face, my sister's face
Tiki mug, tiki mug

White beachcombers in tiki bars drinking zombie cocktails from
tiki mugs
The undead, the Tiki people, my mother's face, my father's face
The black brown and ugly that make customers feel white and
beautiful

Tiki mugs, tiki ashtrays, tiki trashcans, tiki cultures
Tiki bars in Los Angeles, a tiki porn theatre, tiki stores
Tiki conventions, a white guy named Kukulele singing in
oogabooga fake Hawaiian
makes me yearn to hear a true Kanaka Maoli like
Kaumakaiwa Kanaka'ole sing chant move his hands the
antidote to tiki bar people who don't listen because tiki
don't speak any language do they

Tiki bars in L.A., in Tokyo, in the lands of Tiki, Honolulu,
Pape'ete
Wherever tourists need a background of black skin brown skin
ugly faces to feel land of the free expensive rich on
vacation hard working with a background of wallpaper tiki
lazy people wallpaper
made from our skins our faces our ancestors our blood

Can I remind us that Tiki
Whom we call Ti'eti'e and Ti'iti'i
Some call Ki'i, some call Ti'i

That Tiki was beautiful, jutting eyebrow, thick lips, wide nose
brown skin in some islands
black skin in some islands
brown black deep, thick thighs
jutting eyebrow, thick lips, wide nostrils, breathing

Lifting the sky over Samoa, lifting the sky over Tonga
lifting the sky over Viti, lifting the sky over Rapanui
lifting the sky over Tahiti, lifting the sky over Hawai'i
lifting the sky over Aotearoa, and looking to, paying
respects
to Papua, to the Chamorro, to Vanuatu, to Kiribati
lifting the ten heavens above Moana, not your Pacific, but
our Moana

And now in tiki bars Chilean soldiers have drinks from tiki mugs
after shooting
down Rapanui protestors in Rapanui, not Easter Island, not
Isla de Pascua
but Rapanui, whose entire population was kidnapped and
sold in slavery
to Chilean mines in the 19th century, and whose survivors
are shot on the streets
of their lands still just a few days ago in 2011 in Rapanui

And American police drink maitais in Honolulu bars from tiki
mugs while
native Hawaiian people live homeless on the beaches

And Indonesian settlers drink from tiki mugs in West Papua where
100,000
Papuan have been killed seeking freedom after being sold down
the river by
President Kennedy so he could build some mines for his rich
cultivated humanitarian friends

And French tourists drink from tiki mugs in Nouvelle Calédonie
and Polynésie Française
while native people are...

Where? Where are we?
In the wallpaper, on the mugs?

(Laguna, California, 2011)¹

¹ "Tiki Manifesto." Dan Taulapapa McMullin. Unpublished Poem, 2011.

Earlier this year in California, I remember people saying that some art works of mine, paintings and cast sculpture portraits of islander friends, looked “primitive.” I thought, “What is it about these works that looks primitive?” I realized, “Oh, to my California viewers, the islander people in my art works are ‘primitives,’” In the case of the paintings and sculptures in question, the portraits were of my Pacific Islands friends Glenville and Nisi from a contemporary dance company in the Fiji Islands. For the Western viewers, the Pacific Islander racial features of the people in the portraits made the portraits seem primitive, even tho the style of the portraiture was a Western representational style, not a kitsch style, and not a tribal style. It was finally as simple a question as skin color and facial proportions.

In photographs from American pornography from 1950's magazines with names like “Pagan” and “Gaze”, the dominant form of tiki kitsch was of a naked American woman engaged in seducing a wooden tiki. The varieties of tiki resemble, and often come in hybridized forms with, other American racist images including the wooden Indian mascot, the African American minstrel show, and the Asian coolie. But in place of the Pacific Islander body are abject forms of the Polynesian wooden deity Tiki. Such tiki kitsch representation is both the dead body of the Pacific Islander male rival and the pagan mask that the European American male inhabits in the fantasy of paradise, where the European American female is rendered helpless by pagan desire.

Altho the 19th century, and post World War II forms of tiki kitsch are faded, the myths they reinforced continue to influence how the world perceives Pacific Islanders and Polynesians, and utilizes tropes of paradise and the fall of the native. In the 1996 New Zealand film *Twilight of the Gods*, the lead character is a young Maori man, Toa, who finds his village destroyed in war but rescues the only survivor, his enemy, a young white soldier who becomes his lover. In a lush stream Toa cavorts madly, catching an eel with his bare hands for his lover, who survives him when the other white New Zealanders return and kill Toa. The scene is copied in the waterfall grotto scene of the 2002 *Lord of the Rings*, where Gollum cavorts madly singing catching a fish with his bare hands, to be betrayed by Frodo his master seducer, thereby proving in betrayal Frodo's heterosexuality, maleness, dominance, and whiteness. This fusing of the queer and the indigenous in art speaks to their similarity as marginalized categories merely. Writer-director Peter Jackson as a member of the dominant settler culture in New Zealand, the country known to the Maori as Aotearoa, invests his film *Lord of the Rings* with tropes in process and narrative that both elide and reference in their being the violent colonial history of New Zealand.

The overlaying of a mythological West onto the landscape of a Polynesian country Aotearoa-New Zealand, is in a post-colonial sense the political project of *Lord of the Rings*. New Zealand writer-director Peter Jackson's cast Polynesian actor Sala Baker, in make-up and costume as Uruk Face Eater the ultimate Orc badass monster, and in body armour, and tiki like helmet, as Sauron the Dark Lord of Mordor. Here Jackson's scenes referring to orcs as fallen elves, and Sauron as a fallen wizard, utilizes the trope of the inner decay and justifiable fall of the Polynesian. Such metaphors don't have power to influence, they are metaphors for and reflections of the power structure of the world as it is. Tropes such as these are as simple as a tiki mug, or as old as a Polynesian character from Melville, and as true as contemporary colonialism.

For indigenous islander artists, tiki kitsch raises various political questions about the relationship between Pacific Islander and Western cultures. Thru a careful and ongoing analysis of Pacific Islander fine arts and Western appropriation and kitsch, one can tease out

misperception, change, and meaning from the materials and performances of art and kitsch. For instance, in what ways has tiki kitsch, remembering that it is an American appropriation cultural form, influenced Polynesian and Pacific Islander traditional sculpture? Questions such as this are at the heart of indigenous art practice.

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