Performing Polynesian Masculinities in American Football: From 'Rainbows to Warriors'

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In recent years, the place of Polynesians in American football has received considerable attention as the news media complex has featured stories on Hawaiians and Tongans performing Maori war dances in New Mexico and Texas, while the life stories of Samoan players appear in film and in hardcover. In this essay we argue that the performances of Polynesian warriorhood and masculinity in American football embody the larger history of islander engagements with US empire, militarism and global capitalism in the Pacific. We focus on the University of Hawai‘i (UH) football team, whose ‘macho makeover’ as ‘The Warriors’ – including a rejection of its ‘Rainbow’ traditions – reveals the racialized and gendered nature of sports marketing and recruiting. Our history of Hawaiians and Samoans in UH football sheds light on the ways that present flows of capital, images, and bodies follow familiar patterns of settler colonialism, military occupation, islander diaspora and indigenous struggle.

In recent years, local, national and international news media have given special attention to the place of Polynesians in American football, producing articles on Tongans performing Maori ‘war dances’ in Texas and films covering the careers of Samoan players in Hawai‘i. [1] In this essay we argue that the performances of Polynesian warriorhood and masculinity in American football embody larger histories of Islander engagements with US empire, militarism, tourism and global capitalism in the Pacific. We focus on the University of Hawai‘i (UH) football team, whose ‘macho makeover’ as ‘The Warriors’ – including a rejection of its ‘Rainbow’ traditions – reveals the racialized and gendered nature of sports marketing and recruiting. Our discussion of Hawaiians and Samoans in UH football sheds light on the ways that present flows of capital, images, and bodies follow familiar patterns of settler colonialism, military occupation, islander diaspora and indigenous struggle.

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A special sports segment on a 3 July 2008 KHNL Hawai‘i newscast brought attention to many of these issues, if mainly in implicit ways. The report opened with an image of the picturesque Pago Pago Harbor and the lush valleys of Tutuila island in the background – the stuff of tourist brochures sans hula girls. Sports director Jason Tang narrated: ‘Life isn’t easy for a young man in American Samoa. Opportunities for him to spread his wings and fly are few and far between.’ Tang went on to explain that a number of Samoan players from the National Football League (NFL) were in American Samoa ‘to give back to future generations’ by participating in the first annual June Jones American Samoa Football Academy. Jones, formerly head coach of the UH Warriors football team, orchestrated the greatest turnaround in college football history when UH went from last place and winless the previous season to co-champions of the Western Athletic Conference (WAC) in 1999; his final season with the Warriors in 2007 ended with the school’s first undefeated season and outright WAC championship, a number 10 national ranking and a trip to the Allstate Sugar Bowl that paid out $4.4 million. [2] In addition to implementing a high-powered ‘run and shoot’ offence and coaching two record-setting quarterbacks (Timmy Chang and Colt Brennan), Jones heavily recruited Polynesian players from Hawai‘i, American Samoa and the US continent. The 2005 ESPN documentary Polynesian Power chronicled the ascent of Polynesians in American football with particular reference to former UH and current NFL football players Pisa Tinoisamoa and Isa‘ako Sopoaga. [3] Coverage of the American Samoa football academy, like Polynesian Power, presented football as one of the few opportunities for uplift and advancement of Samoans who were ‘naturally’ fit for the sport. Though a common story bearing resemblance to the ‘hoop dreams’ narrative, we find this to be a very partial and limiting view of factors contributing to the prevalence of Polynesian football players.

At the heart of our analysis are the complex intersections of culture, history, politics and economy. A Samoan cultural malaga tradition of travelling, returning and contributing emerged in the KHNL newscast, as in the interview with former UH player and current Cleveland Browns defensive end Melila Purcell, who stated: ‘It was always a dream of mine to come back and teach the kids . . . try to give back as much as I can.’ [4] Yet as Miami Dolphins defensive tackle Paul Soliai stated, the motivations are largely economic: ‘In Samoa there’s only two ways off the rock. It’s to join the army or get a scholarship for education or sports.’ [5] Indeed, the deep political and economic interconnections between the two institutions of sport and military frequently arise in discussions of one or the other; for instance, the logistical challenge of moving over 550 people to New Orleans for the 2008 Sugar Bowl was likened by one UH administrator to ‘quickly sending a US Army brigade from Schofield Barracks [on O‘ahu] to South Korea’. [6] In such discourse we find that the symbolic battlefield of football operates as both an institution and a metaphor for fulfilling cultural obligations, attaining class mobility and invading (or touring) foreign territories.

We argue that football players and spectators alike use performances of Polynesian warriorhood to make claims to an ‘authentic’ pre-colonial and pre-modern masculinity. These claims counter a more general discourse of emasculation – an
erasure of men and negation of male efficacy – that has accompanied the colonial process in the Pacific. As an arena for the fulfilment of masculine warriorhood, football thus appeals to islanders who make connections through their cultural and gender identity. [7] Furthermore, football becomes as site for the practice and fulfilment of family and spiritual values of faith and loyalty, especially for islanders in the diaspora. [8]

At the same time, the Polynesian male warrior becomes a commodity image to be sold for big business. In the era of (neo)colonial global capitalism, multi-billion-dollar corporations market sport and sport-related products ‘as men’s culture and as a hypermasculine spectacle for society as a whole’. [9]. Advertisements featuring images of strong, physical, working-class men target a white middle-class audience, evoking in these ‘softer’ men anxieties of modernity’s ‘feminizing’ effects and an envious identification. [10] Messner argues that rather than subverting social stratification, the ‘tough guys’ reaffirm the superiority of men vis-à-vis women and also serve as the ‘other’ against which ‘modern’ men define themselves. [11] The image of the ‘black super-athlete’ (the ‘tough guy’ par excellence) recapitulates racial hierarchies by reifying a notion of primitive hypermasculinity that is both glorified and demonized. [12] The commodity fetishes that contain this essence become the points of access and domination for those who purchase the various lines of apparel and merchandise marketed by this image. More than just a way of selling shoes, the images of racialized male bodies in athletics is deeply interpolated with the ways that American society imagines its own body politic. Looking historically at the use of Indian imagery in sport, King notes that the warrior mascot has worked differently through time to authorize the scripts of American conquest and imperialism while also defending hegemonic notions of white masculinity. [13]

Here we examine these dynamics in the context of US empire in the Pacific. We examine the ways that the performance of Polynesian warriorhood by the University of Hawai‘i football team has produced a vision of islander masculinity that has been used for marketing and recruiting on the one hand, and on the other for commenting on the contours and fault lines of race, class and gender in neocolonial Hawai‘i and American Samoa. Within the present configuration of the sports-media complex, islander men, like African American and Native American men, have become commodified and consumed as racialized and hypermasculine spectacle. Yet to limit their agency to that of the commodity sign is to miss the longer colonial backdrop against which Islanders have laboured to construct meaningful identities and lives. Thus we frame our analysis of the UH Warriors in the larger political-economic relationships between the US, Hawai‘i and American Samoa with an eye to the place of collegiate athletics therein.

American Empire, Football and Islander Movements in the Pacific

In the Pacific, the introduction of American football went hand in hand with the expansion of US empire. [14] The US first found its imperial sea legs in the Pacific
A company of Congregational missionaries from New England arrived in the islands in 1820, and in 1841 they established the exclusive Punahou School for their children. Sports researcher Dan Cisco notes that in 1875, principal Amasa Pratt introduced an early form of football to the students there. Though the first game reported by a newspaper occurred on 1884 ‘between the boys of Fort Street and Punchbowl Schools’, a more telling and symbolic match took place in December 1890 between a Honolulu team and sailors from the USS Charleston. Just as the American soldiers secured a 18–0 victory at that time, so too did a later company of marines from the USS Boston back the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom by a group of mostly-American missionary descendants and businessmen. At the outbreak of the Spanish American War in 1898, the USS Charleston was back in action, ‘steam[ing] into Guam’s Apra Harbor to seize the island’. The war with Spain motivated President McKinley to annex Hawai’i without a treaty (in violation of international law), thereby defeating a well-organized Native Hawaiian resistance movement. Through its victory in the war, America took possession of Guam and the Philippines.

With wind in its imperial sails, the US joined in the division of Samoa when it signed the 1899 Treaty of Berlin with Great Britain and Germany. In 1900, American Samoa or Eastern Samoa (Tutuila, Aunu’u and Manu’a) became an unincorporated territory of the United States governed by the navy; that same year Hawai’i became an incorporated territory. As McGregor details, over the next few decades ‘the United States built up its naval forces in Hawai’i, Guam, Samoa and the Philippines to secure its economic interests in Asia against the major European powers and Japan’. US cultural imperialism proceeded, in part, through the extension of American sport in its Pacific and Caribbean territories.

The territory of Hawai’i was a racially stratified plantation society ruled by the small clique of haole (white) sugar barons who, after orchestrating the illegal overthrow, proceeded to use government as a form of class domination over the predominantly Asian workforce (whose labour they exploited) and minority indigenous population (whose land they appropriated). In pre-Second World War Hawai’i, American football grew immensely in popularity at the club, prep and college levels. A unique ‘barefoot’ league developed as a site for the performance of a rugged ‘local’ working-class masculinity that Asian American and Native Hawaiian young men laid special claim to. Football was at once a site for the demonstration of American assimilability and a field for eschewing haole (white) domination.

Similarly high-school football teams frequently represented the class and ethnic backgrounds of the communities they came from, which in many cases followed clear lines. In a particularly meaningful 1947 game, McKinley High School (nicknamed ‘Tokyo High’ due to the high percentage of Japanese Americans in the student body) defeated the elite Punahou School in a game that was viewed as ‘labor against management’. With such deep connections to the various sectors of Hawai’i’s community, high-school football between the 1940s and 1960s frequently drew sell-out crowds of 25,000 at the Honolulu Stadium in Mō‘iliʻili.
Though football in Hawai‘i took very localized forms, it also travelled on routes shaped by both American imperial designs and indigenous Islander motives. Diaz has described the spread of American football in post-war Guam by the US Navy personnel and civilian workers, which included native and non-native Hawaiians attached to the bases. [28] On an island experiencing demographic and political-economic shifts, the development of an island-style youth football team fostered a remasculinization of indigeneity among islander men vis-à-vis the military teams and Americans more generally.

As in Hawai‘i and Guam, sporting pathways overlapped in significant ways with naval routes to and from Samoa. Though no official record exists, it is likely that Samoans were first introduced to American sports by US Navy personnel who played them recreationally while stationed at the base at Pago Pago before the 1950s. Many Samoans became members of a naval reserve unit known as the Fitafita guard. When the navy transferred territorial administration to the Department of the Interior in 1951, members of the Fitafita were offered free passage to the US. The ‘Great Migration of 1952’ led many Samoans to settle in Honolulu initially and eventually spread to West Coast cities such as Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco and Seattle; it was in the US that many became familiar with American football for the first time. Since the initial movement, family ties, military enlistment and educational opportunities – especially through football scholarships – have seen Samoans continue to migrate to Hawai‘i, the West Coast and elsewhere in the US. Prior to this, Samoan members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS, or Mormons) had migrated in the 1920s to Lā‘ie, Hawai‘i, where a temple had been constructed; [29] this community would eventually become a Mormon Polynesian enclave and the home of renown football players.

Meanwhile, the popularity of American football grew in the islands after Vaughn Hawkes, a visiting American teacher at the Mormon-run Mapusaga High School, helped organize the first football game in the territory in 1963 against the government Samoana school. Hawai‘i-born Al Lolotai, the first Samoan to play in the NFL (1945), returned to American Samoa in the 1970s to run football camps and eventually become athletic director for the Department of Education. This signals an important dynamic in Samoan migration: that it is rarely one-way. Indeed, Samoans continue to circulate between American Samoa, (independent) Samoa, the United States, New Zealand, Australia, Hawai‘i and Guam in temporary, repetitive movements known as malaga, a traditional practice of inter-village and inter-island visiting and sharing of resources. [30]

**UH Football and Island Players**

At its inception, the UH was first established as a US land grant institution in 1907 and called the College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts. [31] The first football team, comprising both faculty and students, was coachless in 1908 and lost to Punahou as it entered play against a variety of prep, club and military teams. [32] In 1909 Austin
Jones was hired as the school’s first football coach, and the team earned its first victory against McKinley High School. [33] In 1912 the campus, renamed College of Hawai‘i, moved to its present location in Mānoa on O‘ahu. [34] The college became the University of Hawai‘i in 1920, and its newly nicknamed ‘Fighting Deans’ lost to their first college opponent the University of Nevada Wolf Pack on Christmas Day. [35] The year 1921 saw the arrival of coach Otto ‘Proc’ Klum, who led the team to a winning season and its first intercollegiate win against Cal Poly Pomona. [36] In 1924, on New Year’s Day, a rainbow appeared at Mo‘ili‘ili field late in a tied game between UH and Oregon Agricultural College (predecessor to Oregon State). UH scored shortly thereafter and won, leading reporters to bestow upon them the new nickname ‘Rainbows’ and locals to believe that their team would win if a rainbow appeared. [37] Though not mentioned in most sports histories, there is a longer genealogy of rainbows in the valley related to Kahalaopuna, a chiefess and deity born of the wind and rain. [38]

A number of Native Hawaiian players were prominent in the early UH teams, though perhaps none more so than Thomas Kaulukukui, Sr. A graduate of Hilo High, Kaulukukui became the first All-American from UH in 1935, in part due to the national recognition he garnered when he made a 103-yard kick-off return against the University of California Los Angeles and received the nickname ‘Grass Shack’ from the famous sports writer Grantland Rice. [39] The first in his family of 14 to attend college, Kaulukukui earned 17 letters in five sports and became student body president his senior year. [40] Along with Eugene ‘Luke’ Gill, Kaulukukui coached the 1941 Rainbows team until their season was ended with the bombing of Pearl Harbor on 7 December. During the war, Kaulukukui served as an officer in a work battalion and a lieutenant in the Army Corps of Engineers; in the meantime, he and his brothers Sol, Jimmy and Joe played for the Rainbows Athletic Club as they handed the Air Force a sound defeat in 1944. [41] Kaulukukui went on to an illustrious career as head coach and athletic director at UH, head coach at Iolani High School, founder of Pop Warner youth football, and an original trustee of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs. [42]

In 1966, UH began to play an all-college schedule, and in 1974 under coach Larry Price they were dubbed the ‘Rainbow Warriors’. In 1977 UH entered the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I, and Dick Tomey took over as head coach. While at UH (1977–1986), Tomey was instrumental in creating a recruiting pipeline of Samoans and other local football players from Hawai‘i high schools, among the most notable being the Noga Brothers (Al, Niko, Pete) from Farrington High (Honolulu), all of whom went on to the NFL. [43] In 1986, Al Noga would become the first player from UH to earn first-team All-American honours. Two other Rainbow Warriors of Tomey’s, Jesse Sapolu and Mark Tuinei, went on to all-pro careers as offensive lineman and won seven (combined) Super Bowls with the San Francisco 49ers and Dallas Cowboys. Tomey and his coaching staff were among the first schools to recruit players from American Samoa some 20 years before many other college football programmes ‘discovered’ Pago Pago and Samoan football.
players in general. Perhaps the greatest legacy of Tomey’s 30 years of recruiting Polynesian football players is the numerous former players who are now collegiate coaches who can continue to recruit Samoans and other Polynesians to college football programmes nationwide.

A large percentage of the Samoans who have gone onto success in collegiate and professional football are the sons, grandsons and relatives of the Fitafita who initially left American Samoa in 1951. A small number of Samoans such as former NFL football players Al Lolotai and Charley Ane were raised in Hawai’i and went on to play professionally in the 1940s and 1950s before the large-scale emergence of Samoans in collegiate football from the 1970s to present. UH and BYU from the 1970s to present have been the largest recruiters of Polynesian football players. BYU, due to its affiliation with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has had an important recruiting base in the large number of Samoan, Tongan and (to a lesser extent) Native Hawaiian members of the Church. BYU and UH were at one time both members of the Western Athletic Conference and annually battled both on the football field and in the recruitment of Polynesian high-school and junior-college football players. For decades the two schools have competed for high-school football players from the north shore of O’ahu who attend Kahuku High School, which is located adjacent to the Mormon enclave of Lā‘ie. During the 2006 NFL season Kahuku had six of its graduates playing professional football and since the 1970s has sent hundreds of its graduates to Division I football programmes, many of whom have gone on to stardom at Hawai’i and Brigham Young.

With the largest number of Samoans, Native Hawaiians and other Polynesians of any programme in the country, the University of Hawai’i Warriors markets and portrays itself as Polynesia’s team. However, prior to June Jones and the shift from Rainbows to the Warriors, the school had a history of Samoans excelling under earlier coaching staffs. We have already mentioned Tomey’s teams and standouts. His successor Bob Wagner followed his lead and coached the Rainbows to an 11–2 record (1992) and a top 20 finish with an all-Samoan defensive line that included future NFL football players Ma’a Tanuvasa and Ta’ase Faumui.

Between the Wagner and Jones was Fred von Appen, whose coaching staff remarkably did not actively recruit many local high-school players or Samoans from Hawai’i, California and American Samoa. This, in fact, was one of the reasons given to explain von Appen’s career-ending season as UH went an NCAA record-tying 0–12 and held the longest losing streak in the nation at 18 games. [44]

From Rainbows to Warriors

The hiring of NFL coach (and former UH player) June Jones in 1999 set the stage for a series of massive transformations at UH that revolved around a remaking of Polynesian warriorhood. Upon being hired at UH, Jones prioritized recruitment of local high-school players from Hawai’i and Polynesians from American Samoa, California and elsewhere. Though the 1999 squad dropped their first game to the
number-19 University of Southern California, the revitalized Rainbow Warriors finally snapped their 19-game losing streak in their next match and went on to win a share of the WAC championship, staging the most dramatic single-season turnaround in college football history. Jones took on an almost god-like status in the community for his miracle-working abilities. [45]

The record-breaking 1999 season was not without its controversies. A group of Native Hawaiian students and supporters at UH Mānoa called for the removal of the ‘Rainbow Warrior’ mascot, which was seen as a racist caricature of Hawaiian culture and people. In many important ways, this critique echoed those of Native Americans on the continent, whose struggles to end the use of the Indian mascot in sports had exposed the imperialist underpinnings of the Americans ‘playing Indian’. [46] It also occurred in a context of a Native Hawaiian cultural nationalist movement that was particularly strong at the university and helped effect the removal of a racist psychology professor’s name from the social sciences building just the year before. [47] In response to the activism, and an anonymous threat to the individual who wore the ‘buffed-up warrior’ suit, the university officials retired the mascot. [48]

In July 2000, UH unveiled its new logo of a stylized green and white letter ‘H’ with a pattern of geometrical shapes meant to replicate Hawaiian motifs; the helmet and pants were now black (whereas before only green and white were used) and bands of triangles were printed around the upper arm and thigh in a fashion similar to the tattoos worn by many local and Polynesian men. Hawai‘i’s new brand would literally mark the beginning of an aggressive merchandising campaign in Hawai‘i, on the US continent and in Asia and Australia. [49]

At the unveiling ceremony, former student body president Pi‘ilani Smith, the young woman who led the movement against the mascot, issued her verbal protest by shouting ‘stolen Hawaiian lands’ as a reminder that the university sat on lands illegally seized from the Hawaiian Kingdom during the 1893 overthrow. Angered that the university effectively coopted indigenous critique as a way of solving its branding problem, Smith told reporters: ‘My issue is about institutionalized racism. Not so much the marketing, but the misappropriation of the Hawaiian image. . . . They’re using what will sell, but it doesn’t belong to them.’ [50]

Race and colonialism would very quickly take a back seat as gender and sexuality came to the fore. With the new logo, the image of the rainbow was removed. Though most other UH athletic teams were to keep it in their nickname, the football dropped the rainbow and became the ‘Warriors’. Former UH wide receiver Kyle Mosley explained: ‘Being called the Rainbows, especially for men’s teams, left them open to ridicule. Warriors has a much stronger connotation.’ [51] Former NFL player and UH assistant coach Rich Miano stated: ‘We wanted to have something to do with toughness. I think the rainbow thing . . . doesn’t have what we’re looking for in terms of the mentality of our football players.’ [52] Such an assertion of hypermasculinity was needed precisely because the processes of colonization, particularly through militarism and tourism, had configured Hawai‘i as a feminine space, the ‘hula girl’ waiting to be taken. [53]
Athletic director Hugh Yoshida went as far as to comment ‘That [rainbow] logo really put a stigma on our program at times in regards to it’s part of the gay community, their flags and so forth. Some of the student athletes had some feelings in regards to that.’ [54] Yoshida’s comments made national headlines as the new logo and name suddenly became the center of controversies surrounding racism, sexism, and homophobia. [55] As other scholars have noted, the performance of ‘properly’ masculine identities occurs not only through a opposition to the feminine, but also through a disavowal of the homosexual, especially when carried out in spaces of homosocial male competition. [56] Debates over the historic, cultural, social and economic significance of the old and new symbols exploded – as did sales of the new merchandise. [57] Importantly, all of this revolved around the re-defining, representing and marketing of a ‘proper’ masculinity of Hawai’i’s only collegiate football team.

Enter the Warrior

UH’s ‘macho makeover’ also included the hiring of Vili ‘The Warrior’ Fehoko, who appeared at games with face and body paint, grass skirt, armbands, tapa headband, boar tusk necklace, drums, spear and a berserker fury in his eyes as he screamed ‘Let’s go to war!’ [58] He was a middle-aged Tongan man who was a Kahuku High School football standout and 20-year performer at the Polynesian Cultural Center (PCC), a globally renowned cultural theme park and tourist attraction established by the LDS to support the Brigham Young University Hawai’i campus and the students who received scholarships by working at the centre. [59] Fehoko filled the vacuum created by the loss of the old UH mascot when coach Jones invited him to fire up the crowd in 1999. Not just a man in a big puffy muscle suit, Fehoko represented the ‘real thing’, an actual Polynesian who embodied and performed a brand of warriorhood that articulated both militaristic and touristic – or ‘militouristic’ [60] – notions of primitive masculinity. [61] He soon became a local celebrity and garnered even more public attention during nationally televised games on ESPN (an American sports cable television network) and at the NFL Pro-Bowl held on O’ahu. In 2002 he and his wife Linda formed BigVil Productions and proceeded to negotiate multi-year contracts with UH ($400 per appearance, which included men’s volleyball and even non-athletic functions), the NFL, and other local businesses; together with their four sons, ‘the tribe’ also put on free performances at schools and charity events. In 2008, they incorporated as a new company Vili the Warrior Inc. and turned over management to a Hawai’i-based recording label and a production company in Seattle in order to keep up with the demand for appearances locally and abroad. At the time, he was earning several thousand dollars for hour-long commercial appearances and planning to launch a clothing line and bobble-head doll. [62]

True to the nature of his image, the career of the ‘Warrior’ has been embattled. Fehoko’s belligerent acts towards opposing teams in the 2003 season, which included vitriolic taunts of players and physical altercations with cheerleaders and mascots, led
to numerous fan complaints and a re-evaluation of his status by university officials. [63] This was not the first time Fehoko’s aggression threatened his job security; in 2002, the PCC fired him for assaulting a male tourist. In late 2004, Fehoko filed a wrongful termination suit against the PCC, claiming that his Samoan managers were racially discriminating against him as a Tongan; however, the press had already started to chart out what appeared to be a pattern of violence. [64] Some fans called his ‘savage’ antics a ‘disgrace’ to the university and the state, and a former UH baseball player charged that Fehoko’s behaviour (and that of the whole football team) led to an overall atmosphere of rowdiness and proclivity to fights in the stands. In actuality, though, it is the ‘atmosphere’ – i.e., a larger culture of hypermasculinity and violence – that produces Vili the Warrior and the markets for his (and the football team’s) performances. [65]

In 2005, the NCAA investigated the use of Native American mascots at 30 schools, including UH. [66] Athletic director Herman Frazier responded to the NCAA by saying that ‘Vili the Warrior’ was not an official mascot but a paid performer and that his representations were ‘distinctive to Island cultures and not those of American Indians’. [67] This distinction, however, did not stop Fehoko from suing Electronic Arts for compensation for the use of his likeness as a mascot in their NCAA Football ’06 video game. [68]

Playing Polynesian

The shift from rainbows to warriors was more than just a clever marketing ploy; it also created a space for multiple parties to (re)make and perform Polynesian masculinity. There is a resonance here with the imperial project of ‘playing Indian’ that Deloria [69] and King [70] describe in regards to settler American efforts at ‘indigenizing’ the self – erasing and replacing indigenous peoples with settler societies – particularly through identification with Native American sports mascots. We find similar struggles in the settler state of Aotearoa/New Zealand where the indigenous Māori male athlete and his culture are represented in the sport-media complex and in the national imaginary as the embodiment of primal, savage warriorhood. [71] The usurpation of the Māori as a sport symbol is rooted in the desires, envies, anxieties and fears of male colonizers whose own masculinity is defined, in part, with and against the colonized man’s. [72]

The appropriation of native identity and masculinity is especially notable in the performance of the haka, an indigenous dance mistakenly portrayed as only a ‘war dance’; in particular, the New Zealand All Blacks national rugby team, as well as other rugby teams in Aotearoa and elsewhere, have taken to performing the haka before games. [73] The colonization of the haka as a ‘national’ symbol erases the histories of oppression in which Māori, though not passive, were far from equal participants in the structuring of colonial society; adding to the appearance of equality are the high numbers of Māori and non-Māori Pacific Islanders on the team. The notable visibility of players that are racially marked as Polynesian taps multiple structures of
feeling which are complexly tied to colonial and nationalist histories and to notions of masculinities in Aotearoa, and in many ways works to mask the underlying tensions still extant as Polynesian men compete on and off the field. [74]

In Hawai‘i, as in Aotearoa, the appropriation of indigenous culture at UH allows the players, coaches and fans to ‘play Polynesian’. Here too the relationship between the indigenous and the ‘Polynesian’ is problematic. Native Hawaiians, Samoans and Tongans draw a variety of cultural and class distinctions between and among each other, particularly as the latter two groups are viewed as immigrants vis-à-vis the former, even if other Polynesian groups have been in Hawai‘i for multiple generations. At times, these distinctions become outright antagonisms, as the case of Fehoko’s lawsuit against the PCC indicates. Add to this the fact that many of the players are recruited directly from American Samoa or the US continent, and any assumptions of a unitary or shared cultural background quickly dissolve. Thus the kinships forged as ‘Polynesians’ in Hawai‘i are ambivalent at best, a situation found in Aotearoa/New Zealand and echoed in debates about the place of Māori and other Pacific Islanders in the country’s national rugby team, the All Blacks. [75]

The complexity of these issues comes into high relief in the UH football team’s performance of the haka. As shown in the opening scene of ESPN’s Polynesian Power, the team performed the haka originally as a pre-game ritual in the locker room to get pumped up. [76] In the 2006 season, the Warriors began performing it to fans in the stadium and to opposing teams, exciting the players and crowd alike. The Warriors took up this routine precisely because the haka represented the archetypal performance of Polynesian warrior masculinity, an image that gained global circulation through the advertising campaigns of the All Blacks’ corporate sponsor Adidas. [77] Numerous high-school teams followed suit, though Kahuku High School – Fehoko’s alma mater, located just three miles away from the PCC – had already been known both locally and nationally for its predominantly Polynesian roster and its performance of the haka. Native Hawaiians and other locals have seen the Māori as successfully resisting the colonial feminization that occurred in Hawai‘i and continues to be perpetuated by tourism. [78] In this context, the haka becomes an authenticator of Polynesian masculinity and warriorhood – in no small part because it is performed as such in Polynesian dance revues that feature women doing the hula and men doing the haka. The one place in Hawai‘i that claims to do this best is the PCC (and its surrounding communities), where male bodies in football pads and traditional attire regularly perform for local and international audiences. [79] Indeed two Kahuku High graduates on the UH team – Leonard Peters and Tala Esera – introduced the particular dance performed by the team in 2006. [80] Thus when Vili the Warrior and the football team perform the haka, it satisfies the desires of players, coaches, marketers and spectators/consumers to shore up any questions on the authenticity of the Polynesian warriorhood produced in Hawai‘i.

Not all fans were equally enthusiastic over this display. Knowledgeable Māori observers questioned the football team’s moral, cultural and legal rights to perform the specific dance it chose, the ‘Kapa O Pango’, written exclusively for the All Blacks.
Ironically, that *haka* was composed because of a legal dispute over intellectual property rights that had arisen between the Ngati Toa tribe and the All Blacks over the team’s usage of an older dance. [82] Now faced with their own concerns over creative rights, the UH Warriors decided to remake their dance. [83]

In 2007, the Warriors unveiled a Hawaiian *ha’a*, a switch that they claimed was motivated out of a desire to ‘better represent Hawai’i’. [84] As with the logo switch of 1999 and the justification of the Warrior mascot, any critique of colonial appropriation was sidestepped by an appeal to cultural respect and authenticity, the code words for image management. In this instance, Native Hawaiian players and a Hawaiian studies faculty member were all involved in the creation of their new ‘war chant’. On the national stage, this change became an occasion for rehearsing old stereotypes of the feminized islands and people of Polynesia. On the show *College Football Live*, former NFL player and ESPN analyst Chris Spielman quipped: ‘Man, I just hope they don’t do the hula dance. I can’t see 500 lb offensive linemen doing the hula with a grass skirt. That would give me confidence if I was the opponent.’ [85] Here the perceived replacement of a ‘masculine’ *haka* with a ‘feminine’ hula leads to a questioning of the strength and masculinity of Hawai’i’s football players, which was precisely the source of so much anxiety around the Warriors’ identity in the first place. [86]

**Conclusion: In Defence of . . . ?**

In 2009, UH celebrated the 100th anniversary of its football programme. [87] Tellingly, its own history was silent on the name shift from ‘Rainbow Warriors’ to ‘Warriors’, even as they marked the previous progression from the ‘Fighting Deans’. [88] We hope to this article fills some of that void.

Where the UH Warriors were vocal (if inadvertently) was in defence of their masculinity. At a press conference at the July 2009 Western Athletic Conference Football Preview, Coach Greg McMackin, the successor to June Jones, recalled a ‘dance-off’ that occurred at a dinner banquet on the night prior to the University of Notre Dame’s 49–21 thrashing of Hawai’i in the 2008 Sheraton Hawai’i Bowl. Perhaps seeking to salvage some kind of symbolic victory, McMackin stated that Notre Dame’s team performed ‘a little faggot dance’ that the Warriors responded to with ‘the best haka I’ve ever seen’. [89] Though McMackin apologized shortly thereafter for saying the word ‘faggot’ (which he had repeated twice more in that same speech), the Associated Press was quick to report on his use of a gay slur and link it to Yoshida’s disavowal of the feminine and gay ‘stigma’ of the rainbows nine years prior. [90] Carolyn Goliojuch, a UH alumna and president of the O‘ahu chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, astutely observed: ‘This goes on all the time. This is not an isolated incident. Football coaches, not just ours, continue to be abusive. Why do professional players come out of the closet after they retire? Because of fear.’ [91] More than just a pattern of coaching behaviour, McMackin’s (like Yoshida’s) comments articulate the very premises of football’s
culture of hypermasculinity – the violent repression of homosexuality. Such an impulse flies in the face of a long tradition of Hawaiian and Polynesian acceptance of transgenderism, [92] thus further underscoring the ways that ‘Polynesian’ warriorhood in UH football contradicts the culture it claims to be honouring.

This homophobic hypermasculinity is pervasive in college and professional football. Perhaps it is fitting that one of its most vocal opponents is Esera Tuaolo, a gay former NFL star of Samoan ancestry who was born in Hawai‘i. He waited until he retired before publicly coming out of the closet in 2002 on an episode of the HBO cable television series Real Sports with Bryant Gumble. Sterling Sharpe, who played with Tuaolo on the Green Bay Packers, stated on that episode that if the Tuaolo had come out during the season, he’d be ‘eaten alive and he would have been hated for it’ by his own teammates because it would cast doubts upon their ‘machoism’. [93] Since his coming out, Tuaolo has authored a memoir, pursued a musical career and given talks promoting sexual and gender tolerance across the country (including at UH in 2005). [94] In responding to McMackin’s comments on ESPN’s cable show Outside the Lines, Tuaolo stated not only that the coach’s comments were ‘crippling’ to gay athletes who were already at risk of committing suicide, but that they were also in contrast to the fact that ‘he has gay athletes on his team’ even if he didn’t know it. [95]. For his part, a weeping and apologetic McMackin accepted the sanctions imposed on him by UH: a 30-day suspension without pay, a 7 per cent cut in salary, and service to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Student Services on the Mānoa campus (the same unit that brought Tuaolo to UH four years before).

We raise these critical viewpoints not because we are wholly opposed to the institution of football, the players or the fans. Indeed, author Markham has been intimately involved in a non-profit that supports Polynesian football players, and author Tengan has taught a number of football players in his classes. It is our commitment to the students that motivates us to write this article. The 2008 Hawai‘i Sheraton Bowl turned out to also be a match-up of student performance, a category that Notre Dame performed well in as it graduated 94 per cent of its student athletes and ranked second of all 68 college teams playing in the post-season; UH was second to last, graduating only 42 per cent of its players. [96] Though disappointing, it is perhaps not surprising that what Hawkins has dubbed the ‘new plantation’ of college sports (which exploits and under-educates cheap, non-white labour) is in full operation at the university that former UH ethnic studies professor Marion Kelly has called ‘the last plantation’. [97]

UH football can and must do a better job at emphasizing academic achievement for its student athletes; clearly it has done so in the past, as the story of 1970s UH football star-cum-educator Levi Stanley shows. [98] Coming from the predominantly Hawaiian and lower-class district of Wai‘anae, Stanley took up the challenge of then coach Larry Price to pursue higher education with the same passion that he pursued opponents. Eventually he earned not only a bachelor’s but also a master’s degree and taught in a number of local schools.
In contrast, Capt. Soon Togiola, a Hawai‘i-born Samoan and 2001 UH alumnus, provides a narrative of his path to the military on a video posted on the US Army Pacific (USARPAC) website. [99] He states:

It was during my Junior year at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, one of my football coaches was an instructor at the University of Hawai‘i ROTC [Reserve Officers’ Training Corps] program. . . . So he asked me, ‘Hey, how bout trying to take a shot at being an officer?’ . . . So I tried it, took a leap of faith, and I ended up liking it. So, long story short, today, seven years later, I’m company commander for a troop of a hundred soldiers.

In May 2009 Togiola was on his third tour of duty in Iraq. [100]

Here the transition from war-chant to war is seamless. This is not surprising, given the fact that the interconnections between football, the military and imperialism are deep. [101] Within this complex, Hawai‘i is one of the most highly militarized places in the planet, and the headquarters of the US Pacific Command – which covers almost half of the globe. [102] In the current theatre of America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Pacific islanders have had the highest casualty rates (as percentage of population) among all ethnic groups serving in the US armed forces. [103] The prevalence of Oceanian soldiers has not only to do with the limitations of island economies, but also the kinds of cultural and gender identities formed by a whole host of militarizing institutions in the Pacific, including sport. [104]

Paul Soliai, whom we cited at the beginning of the article, stated that football was the only alternative to the military for young men trying to ‘get off the rock’ in American Samoa. For Togiola, the opposite was true as football led him straight to the Army. We understand that the options presented to our island youth are few; this, however, should serve as motivation to create new alternatives and to imagine new ways of being. We also do not wish to ignore the agency of those who choose to pursue careers in sports or the military. Yet if the ‘choice’ between football and fatigues continues to be the only ‘reality’ given to our young men (and women), then it is evident what kind of ‘defence’ they will end up playing.

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Notes


[5] Ibid.


[10] Ibid., 148; see also Oriard, Reading Football.


[16] Ibid.

[17] Trask, From a Native Daughter; Silva.

[18] Diaz, “‘Fight Boys, ‘til the Last’”, 175.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Western Samoa, consisting of Upolu, Savai’i, Apolima and Manono islands, was a German possession between 1900 and 1914. New Zealand subsequently administered the islands until 1962, when Western Samoa (now known simply as Samoa) became the first Pacific Island nation to regain its political independence.


[27] Ibid., 101.

[28] Diaz, “‘Fight Boys, ‘til the Last’”.


[33] Ibid.

[34] University of Hawai‘i, ‘Moving History’.


[36] Ibid., 146.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Though lost upon mainstream historians, the legacies of indigenous people, place and gods in Mānoa have led Native Pacific cultural studies scholars including Diaz in ‘Disturbing the
Horizon’ and Teaiwa in ‘Mānoa Rain’ to critically interrogate configurations of imperialism, sport and gender.

[43] Tomey in fact was one of the earliest coaches to recruit Samoans while an assistant at UCLA from 1971 to 1976. Some of his players at the Westwood campus included future NFL football players Manu Tuiasosopo, Terry Tautolo and Frank Manumaleuga and later his son Brandon Manumaleuna at Arizona.
[45] See, in particular, Miller, *Hawai‘i Warrior Football*.
[47] The successful fight in 1997–8 to remove Stanley Porteus’s name from the building was preceded by an initial struggle in the 1970s led by ethnic studies faculty and students (Aoudé, ‘The Ethnic Studies Story’; Stannard, ‘Honoring Racism’; Trask, *From a Native Daughter*).
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[60] We borrow this term from Teaiwa, who points out in her essay ‘Reading Gauguin’s *Noa Noa*’ the ways in which the interconnected forces of militarism and tourism inform the construction of dominant images of Polynesians.
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[66] Ibid.


[69] Deloria Playing Indian.

[70] King, ‘On Being a Warrior’.

[71] Jackson and Hokowhitu, ‘Sport, Tribes, and Technology’.

[72] Hokowhitu, ‘Tackling Māori Masculinity’; Hokowhitu, ‘The Death of Koro Paka’. . .Colonial masculinities are also formed in relation to other masculinities, femininities and trans- or third genders, including those of differently positioned settlers, immigrants and natives.

[73] Jackson and Hokowhitu, ‘Sport, Tribes, and Technology’.


[75] Teiwa and Mallon, ‘Ambivalent Kinships?’. 

[76] Spear and Pennington, ‘Polynesian Power’.

[77] Jackson and Hokowhitu, ‘Sport, Tribes, and Technology’; Tengan, ‘(En)gendering Colonialism’. 


[79] Gonzalez, ‘Consuming “Polynesia”’.


[82] Jackson and Hokowhitu, ‘Sport, Tribes, and Technology’; Tengan, ‘(En)gendering Colonialism’.


[86] At the beginning of the 2009 season, the UH seniors voted to go back to the Māori haka instead of performing the Hawaiian ha’a.

[87] They counted their first game as the 1909 win against McKinley under Coach Austin, not the coachless 1908 loss to Punahou.


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[91] Ibid.
[93] Jim Buzinski, ‘No More Hiding. Former NFL Player Esera Tuaolo Comes Out: “I Feel Wonderful”’, Outsports NFL website, available online at http://www.outsports.com/nfl/20021027eseramain.htm, accessed 27 Aug. 2009. In a contrasting interview, Craig Sauer, a Minnesota Vikings teammate, stated that although he personally disagreed with homosexuality, he still accepted and loved Tuaolo like a brother. Fellow former Viking Todd Steussie, who was interviewed after the show aired, said that he had known already but felt it was a ‘non-issue’ (Buzinski). Still, there has never been an active NFL player to come out of the closet.

[101] Burstyn The Rites of Men; Gems, The Athletic Crusade; Wakefield, Playing to Win.
[102] Ferguson and Turnbull, Oh, Say, Can You See?

References


