Postcolonial affirmations: The return of the Dusky Maiden in Sima Urale’s *Velvet Dreams*

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Postcolonial affirmations: The return of the Dusky Maiden in Sima Urale’s Velvet Dreams

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Introduction

In 1999 the transnational coffee company Nestlé ironically reproduced an image from Pacific colonial cultural memory for an advert promoting the Nescafé brand of black espresso coffee (Nestle 1999, 40). The advert circulated widely throughout Aotearoa/New Zealand and the face that loomed large in this advert belonged to the nationally renown discus-throwing Samoan athlete Beatrice Faumuina, who appeared dressed in what at first seemed to be a traditional ‘Maori’ woven cloak, but what in fact was a simulated image of a packet of coffee wrapped around her naked body. The caption for the advert read ‘Express Yourself’, which ironically invoked the brand of coffee for sale while drawing upon the popular sentiment of self-expression (as embodied in the Madonna pop song of the same name). Ostensibly a playful and light-hearted reiteration of the Dusky Maiden stereotype designed for humour and not offence, the advert nonetheless provides a contemporary example of how cultural difference is used to brand and sell consumer products in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

As a contemporary settler state, Aotearoa/New Zealand is conditioned and indeed haunted by the legacy of colonization. While the Nestlé company playfully reiterates a cultural stereotype that blurs the distinction between Maori and Samoan cultural identity, the image archive provided by the colonial legacy is also a resource for those formerly the objects of a colonial—and colonizing—gaze. This paper considers the kinds of critical tools we have available to critique the persistence of colonial stereotypes such as the Dusky Maiden, which have their antecedents in eighteenth-century Western art and science traditions and find their most current expression in global advertising, music videos and in international art house cinema. Following the example set by postcolonial theory, I suggest that the task for the cultural critic is to offer a critique of the many permutations of colonial power persisting in contemporary society and to affirm the potential for other forms of agency and action in (that is to say, other ways of mapping and expressing) the world.

Postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha addresses the repetitive and easily reproduced characteristics of the colonial stereotype as a paradoxical force that simultaneously reiterates and destabilizes colonial and imperialist authority (Bhabha 1992). Bhabha’s attention to the ambivalent dimensions of colonial power provides the basis for considering other forms of social agency within the colonial and postcolonial milieu. Writing within the discipline of History, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues for an opening out of

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the historical archive to other ways of being, other modes of life, that counter the narrative of modernity handed down by Western epistemological traditions which privileges rational and secular social formations (Chakrabarty 2000). What these critiques (though significantly different in their subjects and approaches) have in common is an ongoing critique of the presuppositions underpinning Western forms of epistemology and governmentality. What postcolonial theory promises is the affirmation of other forms of social agency made possible in the aftermath of colonization. Continuing and extending such a critique, this paper argues that the task for the cultural theorist within the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand is two-fold. We must interrogate how concepts and structures from the colonial past are repeated in contemporary audiovisual culture and how, in their very act of repetition, these concepts and structures provide the conditions for the emergence of other ways of knowing and acting in the world. To do this we must be both critical and creative in our approaches to postcolonial audiovisual culture.

A critical and creative analysis of audiovisual culture in the aftermath of colonization examines how the persistent repetition of colonial stereotypes reveals the workings of power and the capitalist mode of production that underpins contemporary cultures. To affirm the past as a positive force does not mean to suggest a form of historical amnesia where the pragmatics of present-day existence (and survival) outweighs the injustices of a colonial past. Rather, addressing the productive dimensions of the colonial past means to diagnose the many active forces within the colonial archive that refute the active/passive relationship that conventionally structures encounters between colonizer and colonized. This means that the task of the cultural critic is to develop mobile critical frameworks to enable a multiplication of the many possible relationships that exist within and in between the colonizer/colonized dyad.

These two processes (the critical and the creative) will be demonstrated through a discussion of the paradoxical force of the Dusky Maiden stereotype as found in Sima Urale’s mock documentary Velvet Dreams (1999). Invoking the tradition of film noir storytelling in unison with documentary conventions, Velvet Dreams examines the recent resurgence in the kitsch art of velvet painting (termed Tiki Art), the history of the art form itself, and the painters who created them. The film maintains an ironic and playful tone throughout, which simultaneously critiques and celebrates the stereotype and which departs from those ‘discourses of sobriety’ that characterize other Pacific filmmaking documentary practices (Pearson 2005, 186). The plot involves a film noir styled narrator in search of a mysterious lost ‘lady’ who is in fact a velvet painting. He desires the original, and the film is structured as a search to find this woman/painting. The narrator takes us on a journey from the retro lounge bar culture of Auckland, New Zealand, to the art galleries of Seattle (where Tiki Art is experiencing a renaissance), to the South Pacific islands of Moorea and Tahiti (where the ‘Maidens’ and their painters first met). The journey ends back in New Zealand, where the narrator meets the eccentric painter of his Dusky Maiden: itinerant mechanical producer Charlie McPhee, a Gaugin-like figure who regales the narrator with stories of his exploits. Instead of the object of his desire, the narrator ends up face-to-face with the figure of McPhee, who represents the libidinal excesses of a history of colonization in the South Pacific, excesses that are mapped upon his frail and ageing body. The paper argues that Urale’s use of the mock-documentary genre demonstrates the possibility of Native agency within the very systems of representation that have rendered the Native as passive object of an active Western (and male) gaze.

Velvet Dreams uses an ironic take on the documentary genre to invoke a tired and jaded representation of the Native as passive object of an active Western subject at the same time as her mock-documentary techniques gesture to the context in which these
images circulate, thus illuminating and refuting the truth-claims of such jaded representations. This paper argues that postcolonial audiovisual culture’s mode of production expresses force relations that both reiterate existing social formations and provide the necessary conditions for the transformation of these relations. As such, the argument draws from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari to elaborate a cultural politics of the colonial stereotype that affirms its paradoxical force. The stereotype’s gestural acts function as an indexical marker to other forms of agency, and other expressions of power that can complement and/or contravene existing Western models of knowledge, power and political agency.

Audiovisual culture in Aotearoa/New Zealand and an immanent critique of power

Discussions of audiovisual culture in Aotearoa/New Zealand often focus on providing a critique of colonial power and the harm inflicted by negative stereotypes of the colonized subject. Martin Blythe’s seminal text Naming the Other (Blythe 1994) provides a discussion of New Zealand film culture and the representation of Maori by white European (Pakeha) filmmakers in a manner that highlights the continuing hegemony of settler culture. Donna Matahaere-Atariki draws attention to more contemporary images of Maori masculinity when she insists that the stereotype of Maori as animalistic, closer to nature than Europeans, and prone to violent behaviour, still haunts contemporary cinematic productions such as the 1994 film Once Were Warriors (Matahaere-Atariki 1999, 112).

While images of Maori, as the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa/New Zealand, accrue a different form of social value from those of migrant Pacifica subjects, the Nescafe advert referred to above points to a certain correspondence between representations of Maori and other Polynesian subjects. In the case of this advert both Maori and Samoan cultural differences undergo a process of fixing and reifying specific differences in relation to the ideal Western (white, and male) subject. As the anthology Bitter Sweet: Indigenous Women in the Pacific (2000) suggests, Maori and other Polynesian cultural groups are generally positioned in a passive relationship to an all-knowing Western subject. In this volume, Tamasailau M. Suaalii and Jacqui Sutton Beets critique colonial power and the pernicious effects of stereotypical representations of passive and exotically ‘other’ Polynesian femininity. Similarly, Lisa Taouma’s research into the Dusky Maiden stereotype highlights the role played by images in the subordination of Polynesian cultural and sexual difference (Taouma 1998). What these critiques have in common is their attention to the dynamics of colonial hegemony and the epistemological discourses that continue to regulate and discipline representations of Polynesian cultural difference.

These critiques focus on the power of colonial discourses to determine the colonized subject as a poor and errant copy of a prior ideal (Western) subject. Maori men in Once Were Warriors (1994) become the animalistic mirror image of the civilized Pakeha subject; Pacific women in European art traditions become the passive object of an active Western (and male) gaze. Colonial power remains centre stage in such discussions, which provide an account and a critique of power as that which regulates the capacity of others to act. While these critiques provide important interventions into the persistence of colonial power, an additional critique of the colonial stereotype might take the form of an investigation into the many possible permutations of power available to the colonized subject through the mobile and mutable nature of the colonial stereotype. Such a critique might proceed from the understanding of power as immanent and that a transformative practice can emerge from within the very system one seeks to disrupt.
Gilles Deleuze provides an account of immanent power drawn from Spinoza’s concept of the body as defined by its capacity to act (Deleuze 1992). To consider power as the capacity to act means to relinquish a concept of power as that which is attached to ontological categories of Being (what one is) and to embrace, construct and assemble categories that can articulate power as the actions, gestures and interventions of which a body is capable. Rather than focus on pre-existing notions of a body (an organic, bounded concept), critique might instead focus on how organic bodies connect to non-organic elements to form productive and expressive fields of action (in Deleuze’s terms, assemblages). Such an alternative critique of power within the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand might focus on how the techniques of reproducibility established by the dominant regime provide the very conditions for the emergence of other forms of life that might pose a challenge to established interpretative frameworks.

This is the double bind addressed by postcolonial critiques that attempt to construct strategies of social justice within the terms given via colonization, a double bind that revolves around the question of how to move within the terms and constraints of existing debates to express other forms of political agency. The problem any insurgent collectivity must address first and foremost is the regime of capture that transforms any word, sound, gesture or utterance into statements belonging to, and defined by, established orthodoxies. In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, this is the struggle of how to insert movement, interruption and a certain kind of stammering into the existing regimes of sense, order, representation and signification (Deleuze and Guattari 1986). In the postcolonial context of Aotearoa/New Zealand the violence of the colonial past conditions the present and future manifestations of the nation-state. The task of breaking apart and opening out the systems of representation that hold this society together is increasingly imperative. To tease out these ideas I want to examine how a mock documentary such as Velvet Dreams might act as a heuristic device for considering how one can affirm the differential elements within the system of representations made orthodox by colonial power.

Given the predominance of stereotypical representations of Polynesian peoples by non-Polynesian cultural producers, Pacific documentary filmmaking practices have often focused on the ‘sober, evidentiary representational strategies of realism’ to counter these fantastical representations (Pearson 2005, 3). In addition to these ‘discourses of sobriety’ Sarina Pearson notes that Pacific documentary practices are changing and that:

there is incipient evidence that Pacific screen artists are not simply adopting discourses of sobriety to ‘set the record straight,’ but that they are innovating more imaginative modes of documentary that draw from a number of cultural references, including traditional forms of political clowning, contemporary popular culture, and Hollywood cinema itself. (Pearson 2005, 3)

Pearson identifies Sima Urale’s mock documentary Velvet Dreams (1999) as one such artistic practice that provides an ironic twist on film noir and documentary traditions to deconstruct the discourses of exoticism surrounding representations of Pacific Island sexuality (Pearson 2005, 5). In doing so, Pearson argues that Urale provides a critique of popular culture that is palatable to an audience who may reject the ‘more conventionally sober and strident tone that has historically typified postcolonial and feminist documentary’ (Pearson 2005, 19). In this approach Urale joins other Maori and Pacific Island artists (such as Ani O’Neill and Lisa Reihana) who use images from a colonial past to forge new postcolonial futures.

However, Urale not only uses irony and humour to effect a critique but also casts off the proper name of Samoan Woman as prescribed by colonial discourse and contemporary neocolonial practices and affirms her capacity to act in the world. The mock status of her
documentary builds up alter-images of native and colonial identity that scramble the received wisdom of native or colonial agency. In neither condemning nor condoning the repetition of Dusky Maiden stereotypes, Urale provides an expression of Native agency and freedom rather than simply a one-way critique of colonial power. In affirming the repetitive characteristics of the Dusky Maiden in her own art work, Urale expresses joyful affects that the body of the spectator then registers as a relation of force, thus encouraging the spectator to make a move of their own—conceptually, cognitively and otherwise. As we shall see, this is a form of affirmative political cinema that addresses the colonial past as a positive force conditioning the postcolonial present.

**Urale’s affirmative critique**

Screened on New Zealand national television in the late 1990s, *Velvet Dreams* forms part of a burgeoning oeuvre, which includes *O Tamaiti* (1996) and *Still Life* (2003), as well as the recent television documentary *HipHopNZ* (2003). Where other works have drawn upon the responsibilities of migrant children (*O Tamaiti*) and themes of euthanasia and old age (*Still Life*), *Velvet Dreams* provides a creative response to the stereotypical representation of South Pacific femininity that draws on the racial and sexual stereotype of the Dusky Maiden. Jacqui Sutton Beets identifies the attributes of the Dusky Maiden stereotype as including large eyes, oval jaw, flowing dark hair, olive skin, and sweet, passive vulnerable gazes (Sutton Beets 2000, 18). Framed as an ironic take on the fetish object that is the velvet painting genre, Urale’s mock documentary expresses the director’s own fascination with the legacy that is bound up in the Dusky Maiden image. Urale herself admits to enjoying the Dusky Maiden velvets and this pleasure often shines through in her documentary (Rose 1998). Yet the constructed artificiality of the documentary results in an extremely ambivalent work that leaves an uneasy residue for the spectator. This residue is the most intriguing aspect of her film and it poses an alternative aesthetic engagement to that of the exhausted aesthetic of irony within a neocolonial context.

As if to highlight this theme of residue (in the sense of detritus and remains), the film opens in a junk shop, where a discarded velvet painting sparks the narrator’s search for his Dusky Maiden. The establishing sequence features close-up shots of dressmaker dummies and bric-a-brac which are intercut with a staged re-enactment of a bare-breasted Pacific Island woman with flowers in her hair and extreme close-ups of a painting of a Pacific Island woman (vahine) whose pose and costume echo those of the ‘live’ model. This introduction not only aligns the Dusky Maiden image with the trash of history, with the debris and detritus of a bygone era; the juxtaposition of artwork and model seems to trace a relation of objecthood between painting and female body that perhaps reminds the viewer of the continued existence of the Dusky Maiden stereotype in the contemporary milieu of the postcolonial Pacific. The painting’s object-status is reinforced through the use of a masculine voiceover, which repeatedly declares admiration and desire for the paintings/women. The raced identity of the narrator is clearly that of an Anglo-American tourist figure. This is conveyed through the use of dialogue that distances the narrator from the South Pacific setting and through images of the narrator’s white hands revealed in subsequent shots. The narrator spies the velvet painting of his Dusky Maiden in this junk shop and asks himself: ‘But who was this South Seas maiden?’, thus beginning a quest for his ‘velvet lady’ which draws upon the conventions of the film noir genre, a search that within the convention of this genre is ultimately doomed. By using stock characters from film noir (the flawed femme fatale and detective character), *Velvet Dreams* draws upon established popular culture knowledge to make its political point. The first-person
voiceover used to open the film establishes an ironic and parodic atmosphere, thus illuminating the stereotype of the Dusky Maiden as the fetish object of a white male gaze. The spectator is necessarily wired into this persona through the tone of the narrator’s voice, which saturates the film’s diegesis, and which subsequently organizes the camera’s point of view.

This film noir narrative technique is interwoven with more conventional documentary ‘talking heads’ sections where prominent art historians, cultural commentators and critics provide an analytical history of the Dusky Maiden stereotype. This odd mix of fiction and non-fiction draws upon the mock-documentary tradition that includes such films as Woody Allen’s Zelig (1983) and Rob Reiner’s This is Spinal Tap (1984). As Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight define it, mock documentary is a fictional text, which emulates the conventions of documentary, thus challenging the boundaries between factual and fictional discourse (Roscoe and Hight 2001). By incorporating a film noir narrative technique (fiction) with ‘talking heads’ sequences (a factual convention normalized by documentary discourse), Velvet Dreams uses mock-documentary techniques to revise racialized representations and to put in to question all forms of mediation. The mock-documentary format enables a critique of colonial stereotypes at the same time as enabling a certain playful affirmation of these cliché images. Just as This is Spinal Tap provides a parody of rock stars in a loving and appreciative way, so too Velvet Dreams expresses an appreciation of the way in which the Dusky Maiden image has been used and consumed in Pacific Island culture. In doing so, the mock-documentary style draws the viewer’s attention to the limits of all representational strategies as well as the pleasurable complicities of a postcolonial present that these representations produce.

Accordingly, Urale’s mock approach to representational discourses traces the history of repetition that the Dusky Maiden image is caught up in, while also affirming the pleasure produced by this image. This is a dual practice that has both a critical and a creative function. Her critical gesture is to outline how the stereotype is habitually recognized as a passive form of sensuality that communicates a particular kind of acquiescence in the face of an active spectator. The narrator meets with cultural commentators, Pacific Island representatives and art experts who relay a history of the velvet painting tradition and of the stereotype. However, the documentary does not rest simply on historicization to conduct a political critique. Through the insistent and banal replay of images of naked and nubile young women (who perform as live re-enactments of paintings, or who appear in extreme close-up shots from record covers, magazine articles and paintings), Urale re-animates this colonial stereotype within a contemporary setting. Through the cognitive and visual force of these visual repetitions, Urale scatters the bodies of Dusky Maidens throughout the film in ways that repeat the commodity logic of mass-reproduced velvets made by artists of the 1940s and 1950s. These visual ploys function to exceed established categories of meaning, judgement and critique and destroy all claims to the sanctity of context as the privileged tactic for securing the stereotype’s meaning and significance. Instead, Urale uses her creative powers to produce an assemblage of images that do not attempt to tell viewers what the Dusky Maiden represents, but rather what the Dusky Maiden image does—what it is capable of, and what capacities it has to act. This is done through the stylistic devices of excessive repetition, ironic characterization and through the aestheticization and subsequent mimicry of colonial desire.

One particular interview, during which an artist of the 1950s discusses his technique, portrays this repetition of an excessive and ironic image. The artist (Geoff Everett) sits in his living room surrounded by pink flowers that appear to be made of paper or plastic. These flowers suggest an air of artifice and romance that recalls the simulacral effects
of the South Sea island destinations of tourist brochures and advertisements. In this setting, the small, elderly gentleman sits on a couch and describes how he reproduced his images of Dusky Maidens by placing different heads onto a generic set of body postures. In this sequence Urale neither condones nor condemns the artist for his fascination with the female form. Indeed, Urale appears to indulge her own visual fascination with the Dusky Maiden by repeating Geoff Everett’s ‘cut-up’ technique in her own close-ups and re-enactments of the stereotype throughout her documentary. This suggests a play on the mechanical reproducibility of Dusky Maiden images, with Urale tapping into the power that Walter Benjamin attributed to kitsch objects (Benjamin 1927).

In a brief note on Surrealism, Benjamin gestures to the ways in which objects of the past animate the present and how the kitsch objects of mass culture (the ‘last mask of the banal’) hold ‘the energies of an outlived world of things’ through which a new critical consciousness might be forged (Benjamin 1927, 4). The energetic vulgarity of Urale’s Dusky Maidens is insistently in focus throughout the film and their status as reproducible objects generates an economy of distance and nearness that appears to give the paintings a life force of their own and where ‘the world of things advances on the human being’ (Benjamin 1927, 4). This affirmation of the powers of kitsch disrupts any sense of the stereotype as frozen in an eternal and unchanging past. Indeed, these repetitions suggest that the paintings and images have a power to speak back to the spectator. In this celebration of the vulgar, Urale produces a creative and critical dimension out of the trash of history, a celebration of the excessive and the ironic that is continued in the narrative structure of the film.

**Powers of the false and the construction of conceptual personae**

*Velvet Dreams*’ narrator is a false and excessively artificial avatar who ironically performs the past and present libidinal excesses of a white, masculinist colonial economy. While we never see him directly, his presence is implied in the off-screen space to which interviewees direct their responses. Editing, and the use of off-screen space, gives the appearance of the narrator being invited by interviewees to attend an exhibition opening, to meet with experts and (in one sequence) suggests that the narrator has sex with two Papeete sex workers. His presence is constructed in such a way as to evacuate any sense of credibility or belief in him as a narrator, and this falseness and artificiality fulfils a critical and defamiliarizing function.

The film noir voiceover offers a critique of the expository documentary mode as well as the truth status of racialized representations. This voiceover relays all action, imagery and sound in *Velvet Dreams*. Consequently, the centred perspective of the narrator invites the spectator to occupy the same space, and yet his grotesque excesses (the quality of his voice, his overtly lecherous personality) make this centripetal perspective increasingly untenable. The voice gives an unwanted intimacy that is intensely corporeal: it enters the ears and submits the viewer to an excessive sentimental nostalgia that seems to flood the narrator’s virtualized body. The narrator’s voice is an aural evocation of the same seedy mise-en-scène paraded before the viewer’s eyes. The images of nude and nubile women produce an exhausted sensuality that ultimately turns into banality. Rather than cinematic identification with narrator or image or the spectatorial eye as a detached and distanced observer, the experience of watching *Velvet Dreams* provokes the sense of being contaminated by an indeterminate something. The tactile and visceral images foster both a corporeal and conceptual disturbance that exceeds the already ‘known’ of a cliché stereotype. Its involvements of aural, haptic and visual sensations decentre the presumed
beholder of a centralized perspective and disrupt the dialogic relation between subject/object privileged in the gaze dynamic of conventional spectatorship theory. The fetishistic nature of this vision goes beyond lack to a disturbing excess produced by the force of the Dusky Maiden repetition. The force of the repeated copies, their force as simulacra, suggests a form of difference that can be discerned only through a temporal dimension: time as a continual force of change. This is the empirical moment of a Deleuzian politics of perception where ‘[s]omething in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter’ (Deleuze 1994 [1968], 139). As the narrator’s eventual failure to find ‘his lady’ reminds us, this is not an encounter with an originary Velvet Lady, but with the interminable forces of difference itself.

The film’s final sequence demonstrates, in the most compelling way, time as a form of continuous variation. The documentary ends with an encounter between the virtualized narrator and Charlie McPhee, the painter who is responsible for having brought to life the Velvet Lady of the narrator’s dreams. The narrator has tracked him to a bar where he finds McPhee dancing with younger women in a scene that attempts to recall the roguish exploits of early European male painters in the South Seas, such as Leeteg and Gauguin. Yet this scene features the tacky disco lights of a contemporary public bar and the figure of an elderly man dancing in uncomfortable rhythm to contemporary pop music. This scene deliberately fails to evoke any nostalgic aura of a romantic colonial past and functions to underscore McPhee as a poor and shabby imitation of these earlier painters. In the next scene McPhee himself refers to his life as an adventurer, and photographs of McPhee as a young man flash upon the screen as McPhee recalls his youthful strength. However, his ageing body (as well as those of other paintings and collectors) appears in sharp contrast to these photographs of his youth as well as the eternal youth depicted in his velvet paintings.

Urale’s shots of the elderly painter juxtaposed with the velvet paintings of youthful women re-animate the fetishistic intensities of the paintings with which McPhee once imbued them. The editing of Velvet Dreams suggests that the Dusky Maiden has now returned to overpower its original creator. While the stereotype as fetish is presumably fixed in an eternal past, here the Dusky Maiden appears to emerge from a past which expresses time as a fundamental force of change, transformation and decomposition: effects which are registered in the withering of Charlie McPhee’s potency. McPhee’s waning virility reveal life as a form of continuation variation (where we are born, we age, we die), an organic process underscored by the mechanically reproduced image of the eternally youthful Dusky Maiden who remains a constant and unchanging reminder of the past. While McPhee portrays the stereotype as static, timeless and unchanging, it is precisely this timeless quality that affirms another kind of temporal subjectivity that exceeds the symbolic realm of representation and all attempts to contain the Dusky Maiden as a poor representation of a prior ideal. These paintings are powerful in their objective characteristics, not their lack—they are powerful in their artificial postures, contrived sensuality and superficial affects. Beyond the realm of identity enclosures and proper names, these paintings ‘speak’ of powers of agency other than those inscribed by anthropocentric colonial discourse. Rather than condemning white male sexual fantasies or the violence perpetuated through colonization and tourism, Urale destroys these reactive forces by affirming her own power to act. She affirms the powers of the simulacral Maiden as an image, and only an image. The mechanically reproduced Maiden demonstrates how the detritus generated by an early form of colonial desire now returns within the postcolonial milieu with new potential powers. If the Maiden is a false image (and due to the mock-documentary and film noir conventions deployed this is in no doubt
throughout the film) there is a power to this falsity that expresses a becoming-other which propels the spectator into making a move of their own. This power of the false is actualized in the persona of the narrator.

This ‘narrator as avatar’ directs the narrative flow of Velvet Dreams by linking each segment, each location and each individual Dusky Maiden image within a constellation traversed by two planes of organization. The first plane consists of the actual sounds and images that appear on screen (the paintings, the artists and the narrator’s voice) and which are organized by the libidinal economies of hyper-masculinity and hyper-femininity as well as by the narrative drive to solve a puzzle. Here, the over-sexed aural quality of the voice expresses an excessive masculinity suggestive of the same simulacral powers as those of the Dusky Maiden stereotype. The off-screen space that the narrator presumably occupies is also a space that Sima Urale herself inhabits as the maker of the film. Thus, when the interviewees respond to unheard questions, they are responding to a Samoan woman who is asking about their interests and involvement in the velvet painting tradition. Urale disperses her own authorial presence throughout the body of the film into a collective utterance that goes beyond personal identity by emphasizing the disjuncture between what is seen (the faces of the interviewees looking off-screen) and what is heard (the narrator who introduces us to the interviewees). The persona who directs the narrative action is only one aspect of an interlocutor who simultaneously organizes the visual field. A kind of ‘double-brain’ is in operation here where the interlocutor is more than one, more than a single bounded body, but rather a collective assemblage of enunciation. This strategy allows Urale to expand her own identity beyond that of a Pacific Island female filmmaker to embrace a becoming-other of white male desire that affirms the possibilities of other forms of agency.

Conclusions

Velvet Dreams is a collective utterance that affirms the history of entanglement between white men, dusky maidens, tourism, art and economic exchange. By repeating the fetishization of the Dusky Maiden to a point of exhaustion, and by inserting herself into an off-screen space already inhabited by the narrator, Urale produces a collective utterance that breaks down any clear articulation of judgements or morality. Who are these images for? What are Urale’s motivations? These questions remain unanswered and suggest, instead, the need for new sorts of questions: questions that address the implied audience of Urale’s cinematic address and the kind of cinematic subject to which the off-screen space gives rise. Off-screen space allows Urale to become white, male and Western, and in this guise she offers up a compassionate (and at times a masochistic) perspective that conveys the complexities of male/female and colonizer/colonized relations in the South Pacific. More specifically, as a New Zealand citizen of Samoan origin, Urale expresses the dynamic becoming-other of bicultural New Zealand by splitting the dyadic logic of biculturalism into a complicated nexus of cultural flows that include the multicultural dimensions of this nation-state. The mock documentary is an active and creative engagement with the past that critiques without condemning the colonial desires that saturate the velvet painting genre. The film demonstrates how the established conventions of documentary and film noir can be used as potent tools for a postcolonial revisioning of racialized representations. Through these established representational conventions, Urale finds other modes of enunciation within the debris of colonial history itself.

Ultimately, Velvet Dreams delivers the concepts necessary to elaborate upon the duplicitous powers of the neocolonial audiovisual archive that moves in two directions.
simultaneously: the past as a positive force conditioning future postcolonial realities. By actively engaging with the archive of images given in colonial discourse, Urale offers up another form of social agency that refutes the passive/active dynamic common to discussions of colonizer/colonized relations. Instead, _Velvet Dreams_ provides an opportunity for its audience to think in terms of multiplicities, and in terms of the vertiginous dimensions of difference in itself, so much so that the dyad of colonizer/colonized becomes a networked relationship involving an endless array of differences. In adding complexity to these relations, using humour, passion and ambivalence as tools, Urale’s film gestures to a form of cultural politics, a politics that is contingent and yet also affirmative. The logic of _Velvet Dreams_ suggests that one can only work with the forces and materials on hand, and aggressively embrace the potentials of any given moment, ever remaining alert to an event that might be susceptible to an intervention, to a repetition and to a twisting of a becoming-same in thought into a becoming-other in action.

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**Notes on contributor**

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