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A Testimony: Pasifika Media, Representation and Transformation of Community

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Abstract

In this insightful article, media professional Joey Quenga delves into the pivotal role of Ethnic Media for Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) communities, emphasizing the significance of representation. Highlighting success stories like Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson's Seven Bucks Productions and screenwriter Freddie Gutierrez, Quenga underscores how positive portrayals in the entertainment industry empower NHPI youth. He cautions against misrepresentation, citing instances like Gilligan's Island, and explores its detrimental impact on cultural exploration among children. However, amidst these challenges, Quenga introduces a positive narrative—the rising generation of NHPI individuals reclaiming their stories through technology. Island City Radio at Dash and the achievements of figures like Maori director Taika Waititi and Hawaiian actor Jason Momoa exemplify the transformative power of authentic representation. The next generation of NHPI youth now has inspiring role models, fostering cultural pride and a renewed sense of identity.

Keywords*:* Polynesian, Hawaii, Guam, Pacific Islander, ethnic media, Hollywood, Samoa, aloha, media

Since the 1950s, Hollywood has exuded low Asian-Pacific Islander (API) representation and has limited Pasifika representation to token stereotypical roles such as hotel receptionists, comic relief, or sexual objects. This dominant (mis-represented) view often impresses upon and pressures Pasifika youth to move into that direction because that is the only representation they see of themselves in mainstream media. As a member of the Pasifika community, my life-story and the work I have undertaken over the past 30 years represents a counter-story. The following is my *testimonio* on Pasifika media, representation and the different ways in which members from within the community are working to transform media perception for youth.

> *I grew up in Long Beach, California as a young island boy and had a diverse group of friends such as African American, Filipino, Latino and Samoan. The neighborhood 'The Wrig' was built by the same company that made Juicy Fruit and Double mint gum and was a middle-class area. I spent my summers playing sports on the strip of green known as the Patch. Life in Long Beach had a unique diversity and was filled with laughter, sports injuries, gang culture, and many close friends from different backgrounds. Growing up surrounded by such diversity was a valuable experience as it taught me the importance of multicultural communities.*
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> *Discussions about our diverse ethnicities often made me anxious as I was usually the only Pacific Islander in the group. When others would talk about their heritage and hometown, the inevitable question "Where is that?" would come up when I mentioned my family came from Guam. The pressure to blend in was strong as I felt that being different was not accepted.*

In the summer of 1980, my family and I took a trip to Guam, our homeland, for the first time. The journey to Guam was a long one, with a five-hour flight from Los Angeles to Hawai'i and another eight hours from Hawai'i to Guam. As I looked out of the plane window and saw the tiny island, I nervously asked my Pop, "Are we landing on that?" to which he replied, "Yes son, that's home."

Upon arrival, we were welcomed by many family members who hadn't seen my parents in decades. Grandparents embraced their children, aunties and uncles whom I had heard about my whole life, and curious cousins came to meet the family from California. Driving through the villages and seeing everyone look like me was an incredible experience. To say that there was no diversity would be an understatement. I finally understood what Pop meant by being home. While the elders went inside to settle after the journey, my cousins and I took the chance to get to know each other. We all noticed different accents between us. Questions about living in the United States came from all directions. In reality, I was more interested in learning about life on the beautiful island.

The topic of accents and speaking the indigenous language of Guam arose. My cousins were proud of their ability to speak the language fluently, but the familiar feeling of anxiety returned for me when one of my older cousins asked me to introduce myself. Danny, the eldest, asked, "How do you say our last name?" I thought I could answer confidently, so I stood up and said, "Joey Quenga," pronounced 'Ka-wang-ga.' To my surprise, my entire group of cousins burst into laughter. Anita, another cousin, asked "Why are you saying it like that? It is pronounced 'Kengah' like Kangaroo, without the 'roo.'

Even on the island, I felt somewhat excluded and wondered why I had been taught to let others mispronounce my name. Maybe my parents felt the same way and just wanted to blend in and assimilate. As children, they were punished for speaking their native language in school and public spaces due to U.S. colonization and the island being deemed a U.S. Territory. I could not fault them for it since they were also raised in a system impacted structure emerging from colonialism and imperialism.

This childhood experience had a great impact on me. I made a life-changing commitment to honor my heritage through my name. The significance of a name reveals one's identity and roots, and this realization shaped the way I carry myself. More importantly, it also fueled my personal mission to build a platform for the Pacific Islander community aimed at increasing cultural literacy and representation. Much of my work is also dedicated to supporting generations to not experience the identity shame that I did and see themselves reflected in the media. This article examines the historical legacy of Pacific Islander media and how community members are working to transform media representation catered to youth.

Theoretical Framework and Terminology

Why is representation important as it pertains to mainstream media? What does the term "ethnic media" mean? The Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander (NHPI) communities can be deemed a minority within a minority. Often lumped into the API or Asian American/Pacific Islander category, Pacific people have an even greater obstacle to overcome being visible. For example, health statistics have shown that the API community is one of the healthiest on the planet, however,

when this data is disaggregated, the NHPI communities have the highest mortality rates in the world (Taualii et al., 2011). Disaggregation of data among the API group can often tell the stories of these vastly different communities.

"Ethnic media" is produced for (a) immigrant, (b) ethnic, racial, and linguistic minorities, as well as, (c) Indigenous groups living in various countries across the world (Pew Research Center, 2006). "Diasporic media," another term related to ethnic media, includes diasporic communities from around the world. Ethnic media in the Continental United States commonly represents the bulk of immigrant and diasporic populations such as the Latinx/Chicanx and African American communities. Publications such as *Ebony* and *Jet* magazine have long documented current events and societal issues of the black experience. *El Tecolote*, the longest running Latino publication in the U.S., is a good example of ethnic media having roots in student activism from the 1970's to capture the everyday lives of Latinos. As technology evolved, ethnic communities created radio and television platforms such as Telemundo, Univision and Black Entertainment Television (B.E.T.). I want to note a complexity in the emerging role of these stations. While Telemundo & Univision represent corporate entities, often skewing politically-right, B.E.T. became an offshoot of Paramount Global and CBS Entertainment Group targeting African Americans. All three reflect a media source for their respective communities by highlighting stories that most mainstream media would often refuse to cover.

Sherry Yu's article *Ethnic Media: Moving Beyond Boundaries*, examines identities of migrants within the context of creating a sense of belonging and media practices in a transnational context. She argues that we must move beyond the conceptualization of ethnic media as "media for the Other," and give attention to the broader role of ethnic media as "media beyond the Other" (Yu, 2016). But why is representation or ethnic media important?

It is common knowledge that if a community can see someone that looks like them, flourishing in a space that is not typically available to them, they can imagine themselves succeeding in that space. Representation in an ethnic media space also plays a role in the credibility of certain communities. In immigrant and diasporic communities, credibility is often as simple as producing media "in-language" or seeing faces from that community.

Award-winning editor of *Voices That Must Be Heard* and former Executive Director at New York Community Media Alliance, Juana Ponce de Leon states, "One in four people in this country used the ethnic press as a primary source of information. This will only get stronger as the ethnic media develops coalitions and alliances across ethnicities and sees itself as an important media player." This quote resonates with me because I have found that in communities, trust isn't easily earned. People tend to trust those who share their identity, which is essential for building credibility in the media.

Although the Latinx and African American communities are still vastly underrepresented, the Pacific Islanders epitomize a community that is often even more overlooked. In order for this community to be represented, one must understand the diversity of this group. Originating from three regions in the Pacific Ocean, the NHPI community represent some of the latest to migrate from their Pacific Nations to the Continental United States. The three regions that make up Pasifika include; Melanesia (Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea), Micronesia (Guam, CNMI, Yap, Marshall Islands, Palau, Chuuk) and, the most notable region, Polynesia (Samoa,

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Hawai'i, Tonga, Tahiti, and New Zealand). Pasifika people are not a monolithic society. Although these communities share many similarities, there is also beauty in their diversity.

History of Pasifika Media

Similar to African American, Asian, or Latinx communities, media has often taken a stereotypical approach to how Native Hawaiians & Pacific Islander communities were portrayed in the entertainment industry. Oftentimes, Pacific Islander men are depicted as football players, criminals, or jovial overweight musicians who typically sport Aloha shirts. There are a few prominent examples of the damaging portrayals of Pacific Islanders in film.

An early example of the misrepresentation of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders can be seen in the 1932 film *Bird of Paradise*. The film hired Mexican actress Dolores Del Rio to play the lead islander, but her portrayal was hypersexualized and lacked authenticity in both her language and native dance. Despite being filmed in Hawai'i, the filmmakers did not cast any Indigenous actors from the island as leads, prioritizing a brown recognizable face over cultural accuracy. Essentially, Hawai'i and Pacific Islanders were reduced to mere backdrops in the film.

Figure 1. Bird of Paradise, 1932, Photo Credit: UCLA Arts Special Collections.

In 1933, "Alice the Goon" was introduced in the comic strip *Popeye* created by E.C. Segar. Said to have origins from "Plunder Island," Alice is portrayed as an 8 ft. tall Amazonian giantess, bald, with a large nose, no visible mouth, as well as extremely hairy forearms and legs. Initially unnamed and of unspecified sex, Alice had a masculine appearance until 1934. Creators changed her appearance and toned it down to become a gentler more motherly apparition. In later appearances, Alice starts wearing a skirt and flowered hat. Her tribe lives on Goon Island and the Goons are indistinguishable from each other. When Alice speaks, her words appear as a series of meaningless squiggles. Alice the Goon embodies Segar's distorted view of Pacific Islander women, which continued the stereotype of Indigenous Pasifika in animation, perpetuating a long-standing trend among white men.

Figure 2. Alice the Goon, Masculine appearance, 1933, Photo Credit: UCLA Arts Special Collections.

Alice finally made her animated debut in the 1960's Popeye television series as a recurring character who would usually visit Popeye and Olive or be seen alongside her fellow Goons. Because of the episodic nature of the series, most of her appearances were usually minor or had her act as a different character, with the only episode that gave her major focus being "Frozen

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Feuds," where she was portrayed as an 'abominable snow monster' who scared people just by looking at them, but in truth was just a lonely female looking for a mate. This character was often smitten over Popeye.

Figure 3. Alice the Goon, 1960s feminized version with a skirt, flowered hat and a more motherly appearance. Photo Credit: UCLA Arts Special

Another example of NHPI portrayal was in the hit television show, *Gilligan's Island*. This popular show aired for three seasons from 1964 through 1967. The top-rated TV show followed seven castaways and their unsuccessful attempts to be rescued or escape their plight of being marooned on a deserted island. On several episodes, the castaways found themselves avoiding the "headhunters" from the surrounding islands. These Island natives on the show represented violence in different ways. They were hostile against foreign invaders and potential enemies. Other Natives collected the heads of foreign enemies ("head-hunters") out of religious belief. One of the first tribes the castaways encountered were a race of cannibals. Headhunters were typically portrayed by white actors in brownface. Similar to coon caricatures created to depict African Americans, these headhunters often dawned war paint, grass skirts, bones adorned through their noses and chased the castaways around with an abhorrent attempt at Pasifika language. Overall, Pacific Islanders were portrayed as primitive and violent.

Figure 4. Pacific Island Native portrayed as Polynesian Brown Face in Gilligan's Island, 1964. Photo Credit: UCLA Arts Special Collections.

Understanding that during this time the environment was very different, those in control of the media, from producers, to writers, to actors, were often distasteful in their representation of the communities they tried to portray. Hollywood is known for misrepresenting cultures that end up offensively portraying an entire community. Growing up watching negative stereotypes on national TV can discourage children from learning their ancestral languages and customs, potentially leading to the erasure of their cultural heritage.

Present: Community Members Transforming Media

In my experience, the first time I ever saw Pacific Islanders in mainstream media was through sports. Gaining notoriety due to its athletic prowess on the football field, it was not uncommon to see Polynesians on teams throughout the league. Famed sports agent Leigh Steinberg stated, "A Samoan male is 56 times more likely to play in the NFL than an American non-Samoan." Some of the first encounters with Pasifika representation were football Super Bowl Champions such as Jesse Sapolu, and NFL Hall-of-Famers Junior Seau and Troy Polamalu. These athletes provided

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Pasifika youth with someone they could identify with, which in turn, gave them the blueprint for success. Today, there are hundreds of Polynesian and Pasifika student-athletes competing in Division 1 athletics across the country.

In today's mainstream media, we are starting to see glimpses of Pasifika representation in various platforms. The barrier of entry in media has spread beyond the football field. Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson (*Black Adam*), is a prime example of someone who transitioned from a football player to arguably one of the entertainment industry's top movie stars. After multiple successes on the big screen, Dwayne's progress translated well to television with a show entitled "Young Rock." Going into the second season, this production takes the audience through a humorous journey, documenting the formidable years of a young Dwayne Johnson. Other notable actors include Jason Momoa (*Aquaman*) and Sala Baker (*Lord of the Rings*) who continue to create opportunities in front of the camera. These notable actors are carving a path in the industry using their platform extensively to craft public identity for Pasifika.

While there are many other creatives working in different media spaces, I would like to focus on the work of Freddie Gutierrez, a Hollywood screenwriter with roots from Guam. He has written movie and television scripts for many celebrities including Eddie Murphy and Kevin Hart, as well as on productions with Disney and Tyler Perry. Gutierrez is currently in the writer's room for two live shows on Nickelodeon, *That Girl Lay Lay* and *Young Dylan*. Fans of *That Girl Lay Lay* may notice a small change to the cafeteria set on the show. In the spirit of inclusion, the producers of the show agreed to have a sign reading "East Packer High Marianas Club" to be placed adjacent to the stairs in the background. Freddie is amused to see a little sign of his island home during each episode and reminds us that one word can have such a significant impact. Freddie Gutierrez says, "It has always been my goal as a CHamoru is to bring awareness to our culture and people in a way that makes our island proud. Letting the world know that we have something to contribute as well" (personal communication, November 22, 2022).

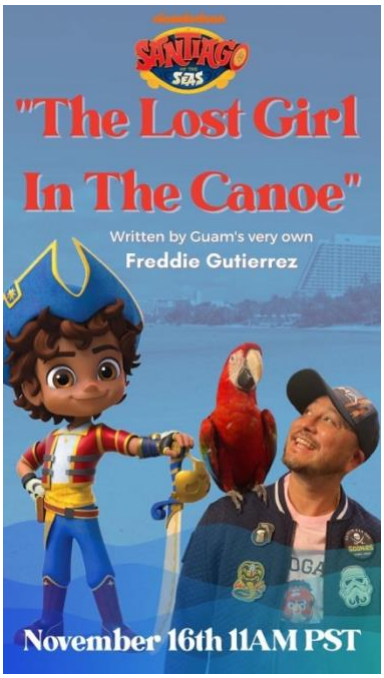

Figure 5. Nickelodeon poster of screenwriter Freddie Gutierrez's Guam based episode, "The Lost Girl in the Canoe," which aired November 16, 2022. Photo Credit: Freddie Gutierrez.

In Season 2, Episode 13 of the animated series, *Santiago of the Sea*, Gutierrez pitched an idea to introduce a young girl named "Ha'ani," a word meaning "day" in a Micronesian language. In the episode *The Lost Girl in the Canoe*, Ha'ani was lost at sea and through the help of Santiago and friends, as well as her ancient navigational skills, she was able to make it to her home island.

When asked what his inspiration was in pitching this story, Freddie responded, "It has always been my goal to create something that kids in our community can resonate with and be proud of. I've been a part of a cultural dance group and understand the importance of our next generation seeing themselves on TV and in movies" (personal communication, November 22, 2022). He continued to say, "It is my hope that every Pasifika artist, director, writer or actor holds themselves to the highest standard. Simply comparing our

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work to other Pasifika professionals is not enough. We must become industry leaders as our work will reflect on future generations who aspire to be in this highly competitive industry" (personal communication, November 22, 2022).

Figure 6. Actress Gabrielle Nevaeh and screenwriter Freddie Gutierrez, both sporting shirts featuring Guam, on the set of That Girl Lay Lay on Nickelodeon. Photo Credit: Freddie Gutierrez.

Pasifika talent has also been identified from around the world. Directors like Taika Waititi, of Māori descent, from Aotearoa (New Zealand) are contributing to breaking barriers in the entertainment industry. His success earned him an Oscar Award for Best Adapted Screenplay in 2019 for a film entitled *Jojo Rabbit*. In his acceptance speech, Waititi stated, "This Oscar award is dedicated to all the indigenous kids around the world who want to do art, dance, and write stories. We are the original story tellers, and we can make it here as well" (speech, March 11, 2020). Through technology, the media itself has transitioned from traditional media (e.g., radio, TV, movies) to digital/internet radio & social media. The work by these creators are redefining Pasifika identity and perception for our youth and community. As they achieve success, it expands into new spaces beyond that traditional limiting stereotypical purvey dating back to 1950s Hollywood of API.

Digital, or internet, radio has become a form of media that extends its airwaves far beyond those of terrestrial or AM/FM radio. Island City Radio is an example of an online channel that focuses on the Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander community in the Continental U.S. Whereas most stations are formatted based on the music or genre, this station's format is predicated on Pasifika talent. The mission of Island City Radio is to highlight the talent within the Pasifika community. From musical artists to show hosts, from producers to interns, every aspect of the station is dedicated to Melanesia, Micronesia & Polynesia. With a global audience of over 5 million monthly listeners, the station works to continue to fill the gap of representation in the radio space. Island City is headquartered at Dash Radio, a platform created by Scott "DJ Skee" Keeney, and is the world's largest all original digital radio platform.

Figure 7. Island City Cofounders CEO Joey Quenga and COO Ammon Green. Photo Credit: Joey

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What is the future of Native Hawaiian Pacific Islanders (NHPI) in Ethnic Media?

More and more talent within Pasifika is taking control of their own narrative. They are shifting media to reflect Pasifika identity, culture, and stories in an authentic way that youth can connect with. Organizations such as Pasifika Entertainment Advancement Komiti (PEAK) are dedicated to amplifying Pacific Island voices in media. PEAK supports and uplifts Pasifika talent in three ways; 1) Fostering community and utilizing industry networks, 2) Offering Cultural consulting and training workshops, and, 3) Providing development opportunities. Although PEAK is a newly established group, the members bring with them a wealth of experience totaling over 50 years in the industry.

NHPI Production companies like ManuScript Films based in Utah, are taking a more hands-on approach to filmmaking and simply writing their own scripts and shooting their own stories. *Sosefina* (Artola & Tanielu, 2022) depicts a true story of two Polynesian females facing adversity and touching on subject matter typically shunned by our community.

Figure 8. Scott "DJ Skee" Keeney, founder of Dash Radio receives Island City Award, September 2022. Photo Credit: Joey Quenga, 2022.

Established media entities are now taking note and developing ways to be inclusive as it relates to Pasifika culture. Disney, for example, has articulated their commitment to ensuring the animated movie *Moana* (Musker & Clements, 2016) was produced in a culturally accurate manner. The Disney creative team formed the "Oceanic Story Trust" which included experts from varying disciplines of Pasifika culture. From in-language musical selections sung by Pasifika musicians to the choreography created by Polynesian dance director, Tiana Liufau. The Oceanic Story Trust also consisted of archeologists, linguists, historians, and tattoo artists. *Moana* was received with reverence, even from the harshest critics in the Pasifika community. The significance of the Oceanic Story Trust demonstrates Disney's dedication to ensuring accurate representation

Figure 9. Tiana Liufau, choreographer, musician and creative director of Nonosina performs at the 2022 Mana Hollywood event. Photo Credit: Joey Quenga, 2022.

and tasteful storytelling, which can influence future Pacific Islander children to preserve their language and traditions.

In summary, ethnic media has come a long way but has much more work to do, especially as it relates to the Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander or Pasifika communities. As generations of young NHPI folks start to see mainstream media and technology evolve, we can only hope that inclusion and diversity evolve as well.

History confirms that our ancestors did not rely on written language but had the ability to pass down history as some of the greatest orators in the world. Who better to tell our stories than us? My conversations with other members of the Pasifika community have led us to see ethnic media, much like the ocean. The Pacific Ocean does not divide our islands, it connects it.

Figure 10. Nonosina Polynesian performers representing at Island City 2022 Mana Hollywood event. Photo Credit: Joey Quenga, 2022.

It is important for youth in K-12 schools to see accurate representation of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in media, especially since it can serve as a powerful tool that shapes cultural attitudes and beliefs. When kids see positive, culturally accurate portrayals of these groups, it helps to challenge stereotypes and increase understanding and respect for their diverse cultures and communities. Accurate representation also gives kids a sense of pride and validation of their cultural identity, which is important for their self-esteem and overall well-being. It also helps to create a more inclusive and culturally diverse society, where everyone's experiences and perspectives are valued and respected.

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