

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OTAGO'S POLYFEST

Jared Mackley-Crump

For almost 20 years, on an annual basis, a small part of Dunedin's abundant geographic and cultural space is temporarily transformed into a bounded, identifiable 'Pacific' place. Across numerous days, age groups and ethnic affiliations, thousands of students from around the Otago region (and sometimes beyond) come together to take part in the Otago Early Childhood and Schools Māori and Pacific Islands Festival, or Polyfest: the largest youth event in the southern city.

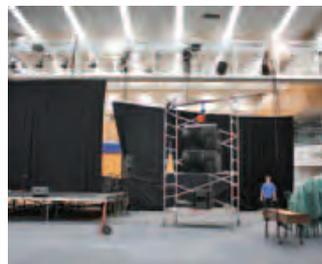
Second to Invercargill, Dunedin is the New Zealand city furthest away from Auckland – the metropolis known variously over the years as the 'First City of the Pacific' and, more recently and commonly, as the largest Polynesian city in the world. In spite of its less hospitable climate, especially when compared with the lands further north from which Oceanic peoples originally came, Māori oratory tells of various waves of migrations settling in Ōtepoti and the Otago region, culminating in the seventeenth century with Kai Tahu, the iwi we know better as Ngai Tahu. When their historically and culturally related 'cousins' began migrating to Aotearoa in large numbers, from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, the majority entered through and remained in Auckland. Despite this, small communities were established and settled in the South Island cities of Christchurch, Invercargill and Dunedin.

Using 2006 census data and growth averages, the latest Statistics New Zealand projections estimate there are around 9,000 Māori in Dunedin, and around 3,000 other Pacific peoples. With a total population approaching 130,000, as percentages, these numbers are well below the levels recorded on a national basis. These numbers are even more significantly out of kilter when considered alongside the fact that the majority of Māori and Pacific peoples are concentrated in certain areas, like South Auckland and Porirua and throughout the central North Island, where their percentages are far greater than the national average.

This is what makes the Otago Polyfest both more unique and more important as a site of identity creation and assertion, and for the negotiation of place and belonging.

A group of local educators and parents came together in the early 1990s to initiate one of the country's earlier Polyfests, following Auckland's lead of 1976, Wellington in 1979, Christchurch in 1981 and Porirua in the mid-1980s. There are now around 17 such events spread right across the country, including the most recently initiated, 2009's inaugural Polyfest in Invercargill, now a staple event in Southland. When its organisers did so, they carried with them the same intentions, hopes and wishes as those who started the events before them, and those who have done so in the years since: that Māori and Pacific youth are brought together in a forum for learning and sharing, for celebrating and affirming their Māori and Pacific-ness and displaying pride in their cultural heritages. In this sense, it would also help to reaffirm and even establish the identities of distinctly multicultural New Zealanders.

In performing aspects of indigenous Māori and more recently arrived migrant Pacific cultural traditions, participants of those ethnicities and cultural groups perform a sense of connection to place. Polyfest illuminates the routes that connect New Zealand to ancestral Pacific homelands while asserting the new roots within New Zealand as a new Pacific homeland. It helps negotiate the thorny issues of identity and belonging for those whose cultures and world



Behind the scenes: preparations, backstage and Primary Performances at Otago Polyfest 2012.
Photographer, Jolana Feleti-Ivala.



High School performances from evening sessions, Otago Polyfest 2012
Photographer, Jolana Feleti-Ivala.

views are often made invisible by the larger, European-dominated Southern narrative. It is an occasion when often inconspicuous communities move from the margins to the centre and are placed into a highly visible public sphere.

Whilst attending Polyfest in 2009, I spoke with some of the older community members about the event and the vibrant hub of community activities I had come to learn about, events which take place outside the glare of public attention and certainly away from the gaze of local media. We spoke about kapa haka, the friendly rivalry that drives dance competitions between North and South Dunedin Cook Islanders, the central role of South Dunedin's Sāmoan EFKS Christian Congregational church, and others. I will forever remember the words of one elder, who said to me that "We [the Māori and Pacific communities] tend to remain inconspicuous and beneath the radar here in Dunedin, but Polyfest is when we all come out to show ourselves and our cultures."

Polyfest, then, is an important space and display of community, both in a collective and individual sense. It is the occasion when the Māori community, the Sāmoan community, the Cook Island community, and so on, come together to celebrate both their individual cultures, journeys, and selves, but to also do so within an environment that celebrates where those cultures and journeys share common histories and characteristics. Polyfest is an affirmation of both the unity and diversity of the Pacific. It reinforces the ideology of collectivity, the so-called 'Pacific way' first proposed by Fiji's founding father Ratu Kamisese Mara. This notion in particular is a strong narrative within Aotearoa's disparate Pacific communities and is one that has increasingly come to (re)incorporate Māori, while retaining the special acknowledgement of Māori as *tāngata whenua*. And this type of acknowledgement extends to allowing each individual Pacific culture represented to retain its individual role within the overall 'Pacific' collective.

Performances at Polyfest festivalise space. At the same time, performances also Pacific-ise space. They are the sonic markers of festivity, announcing that what is taking place within its bounded space is a festival, a time of festivity and celebration. More than this though, they connote that this area, this festival, is a Pacific space (Pacific in the Māori-inclusive sense of the word). The festival becomes an embodiment of what Māori and other Pacific performance cultures are in their New Zealand and more localised contexts: condoned representations of aspects of material culture.

The French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari proposed that music can be seen as a metaphor for how people establish possession of space.¹ Australian cultural geographer Michelle Duffy extended this idea into the festival context,² and, finally, I have projected it further into the Pacific festival context.³ Extending the idea of marking festivity and marking Pacific-ness, Dunedin's Polyfest, as with other Pacific festivals held across Aotearoa, can be seen as a marker of territorialisation, a beacon of belonging that represents the place of Pacific peoples within and as a significant part of the local cultural and human geography of Dunedin. In a collective sense, in their growth and spread across New Zealand, Pacific festivals extend the interconnectedness of Pacific peoples and cultures in a diasporic sense, drawing New Zealand into the Pacific world. Over time, they have assisted in changing perceptions of place, from New Zealand as an outpost of the British Empire to one firmly centred in the South Pacific (or Asia-Pacific) narrative. Most obviously this has occurred in Auckland, a process that Melani Anae has referred to as a "browning,"⁴ but we should not discount the degree to which this has occurred and continues in other centres, and the impact this will continue to have. Pacific festivals are vibrant symbols of the Pacific-ness – the Pacific origins and interconnected role in the wider contemporary Pacific – of New Zealand.

Given the small numbers of Māori and other Pacific peoples who reside in Dunedin, the majority of young people who take part in Polyfest are, unsurprisingly, not of Pacific descent. This makes Otago's Polyfest even more significant as a space of cultural contact. At Polyfest, different 'contact parties' come together in an environment where the European norms of New Zealand society are temporarily inverted, and all things Māori and Pacific become the central focus. It allows borders to be crossed, not only in the sense of connecting Pacific peoples with ancestral homes and ideas of culture, identity and belonging, but in also allowing those not of Pacific descent to cross borders into cultures, ways of being and understandings that may not otherwise have been made available to them. And in that sense, Polyfest has been and will continue to be significant in allowing the Pacific-ness of Otago its annual moment to offer an alternative view of New Zealand's Deep South.

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- 1 G Deleuze and F Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
- 2 M Duffy, "Rhythmic Landscapes: Performing A Sense Of Place," *Youth, Sound and Space*, 1999, www.snarl.org/youth/duffy1.pdf; M Duffy, "Lines of Drift: Festival Participation and Performing a Sense of Place," *Popular Music*, 19:1 (2000), 51-64.
- 3 J Mackley-Crump, "The Festivalisation of Pacific Cultures in New Zealand: Diasporic Flow and Identity within 'a Sea of Islands,'" PhD thesis (Department of Music, University of Otago, 2012).
- 4 M Anae, "From Kava to Coffee: The Browning of Auckland," in *Almighty Auckland*, eds I Carter et al. (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 2004), 89-110.