

Misperceptions of the "Hula Girl"

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Personal essay

The sound of a steel guitar twangs in the background as the camera pans across the length of Diamond Head. A fair-skinned "Hawaiian" woman dances on the shores of beautiful Waikīkī. Wrapped in a grass or cellophane skirt, her hips sway seductively to-and-fro. She is adorned with tropical flowers, complete with a coconut bra. A visitor watches her from his seat at the tiki bar. The bar is lined with wooden images, and torches surround the perimeter. Another slender maiden brings him an alcoholic beverage.

Perhaps the image most affiliated with Hawai'i and Hawaiian culture, both past and present, is the "hula girl". The hula girl graces the cover of tourist media, such as in *This Week* magazine, which features a different model on every cover. She is found on a host of different product labels, from chocolate to water bottles, each company trying to market their product as "Hawaiian". The hula girl is so commonly exploited in tourism that she has become the perceived identity of Hawaiian women and Hawai'i. The hula girl image, a product of tourism, has genderized Hawai'i and created a stereotypical view of Hawaiian identity.

The tourist industry has been a part of Hawai'i for well over 100 years, from the days of the monarchy until the present. One of the early publications that promoted tourism was *The Paradise of the Pacific* (1888), a magazine run by Thomas G. Thrum. This guide was specifically made for tourists and businesses in Hawai'i. *Paradise* contained information on "climate, natural scenery and volcanic wonders, tropic life and travel."¹ The magazine was highly successful by 1900; of 5000 subscribers, only 500 lived in Hawai'i.²

In 1903, the Territory of Hawai'i started to get involved in promotion as well. Previously, the monarchy of Hawai'i had been overthrown in 1893 by Euro-American businessmen. By 1898, Hawai'i had also been "annexed" by joint resolution to the United States. Although Hawai'i was already well known throughout the world, this event put a beacon on Hawai'i as a tourist destination. As a result, the Hawaii Promotion Committee was created. One problem the Committee faced were tourists' interests in the exotic. It wanted to promote Hawai'i as a wild paradise, "while still promoting Hawai'i as a safe and modern American destination."³ Hula became an important vessel in feminizing Hawai'i, which supported the interests of the Territorial government and the tourist industry.

It is believed that hula originated from the dances that evolved during the migration and settlement of ancient Oceania. As the ancient Oceanic people traveled and dispersed from the Malay Peninsula down into Papua New Guinea and back up into the greater

Pacific, dances were created and transplanted. Some dances look very similar, while some look very different; every dance is unique. This migration pattern of hula is also found in Hawaiian mo'olelo.⁴

In the mo'olelo of La'amaikahiki, La'amaikahiki brings the pahu (drum) and kā'eke'eke (bamboo sticks) to Hawai'i from his home in Kahiki. Kahiki can refer to Tahiti or to an ancestral homeland located south of Hawai'i. Besides introducing the implements, La'a traveled throughout Hawai'i to teach people how to perform hula.⁵ The scientific study of migration patterns reaffirms the migrations presented in this mo'olelo, as well as the evolution of hula.

Some of the most important figures in hula tradition are Laka, Kapo'ulakīna'u, Hi'iaka, and Pele. Both Laka and Kapo'ulakīna'u are regarded as being akua (deity) of hula. Kapo'ulakīna'u is thought to be the first akua of hula. Laka inhabits the forest realm which is where many adornments are found (ferns, flowers, vines, etc.). Both of these akua are honored in many hula mele (songs) and oli (chants).⁶ Although Kapo'ulakīna'u and Laka are deities of hula, it can be argued that Pele and her sister Hi'iaka are the most revered figures in hula tradition.

There are numerous mo'olelo, mele, and oli regarding Pele and Hi'iaka that have been passed down through oral and written traditions. Pele is well known in Hawai'i because of her physical manifestation, the lua pele (volcano) and lava. She also takes on both akua and human forms. Pele creates new land by destroying old land. Hi'iaka's manifestation is the new vegetative growth after a lava flow. The two sisters constantly oppose each other, yet have an unconditional love for one another. Their physical manifestations are evidence of the dualistic balance of Hawaiian tradition. Both Pele and Hi'iaka are models of powerful Hawaiian women. In the mo'olelo, Pele and Hi'iaka interact with Laka and practice hula traditions. Their power, along with their connection to the origins of hula, make them important figures in the hula realm.

Pele and Hi'iaka also played an important part in Hawaiian media in the Republic of Hawai'i. In 1901, Joseph M. Poepoe published the famous mo'olelo Hi'iakaikapoliopole in the newspaper. In short, the mo'olelo tells of Pele's and Hi'iaka's adventure, battle, emotions, and inner transformations. This mo'olelo reinforces the traditional view of Hawaiian women as being powerful and independent. By publishing these mo'olelo, Poepoe reminded Hawaiian women that they were not bound to western gender roles or constricts.⁷

Like many indigenous traditions, hula cannot be fully defined by western terminology, it can only be explained. Hula is an art form, a tradition, and a dance. It is composed of different facets such as the mele, oli, the physical motions, and the use of implements. Hula has many purposes such as honoring a person, retelling a mo'olelo, describing wahi pana (place of significance), or reciting genealogy. These themes are just on the

surface level of understanding. Hula also encompasses kaona, which are concealed meanings or metaphors. Kaona can take a phrase or description to a deeper level, often sexual or political. Hawaiians were and are skilled at using kaona within composition. If one is not aware of kaona, a hidden reference can easily be missed. Poepoe's publishing of *Hi'iakaikapoliopole* provided kaona to reaffirm the power of Hawaiian women.

After the Hawaiian monarchy was overthrown, the new government suppressed Hawaiian culture and practices in order to push the people of Hawai'i towards Americanization. However, the tourism industry still relied on Hawaiian culture to provide an exotic experience for visitors. Thus, "hula kitsch" was born. Kitsch is "something that appeals to popular or low-brow taste and is often of poor quality."⁸ Hula kitsch became the creation of the haole businessmen; it was a way to promote "Hawaiian culture" without Hawaiians. This sub-culture was more American than Hawaiian. In "Hawaiians On Tour" (2004), Adria Imada called this "imperialist nostalgia." The colonizers (Euro-Americans) have nostalgic feelings for the traditions that they had suppressed. Instead of letting Hawaiians perform their own culture, they took it upon themselves to be cultural stewards in order to "save" hula.⁹

In *The Art of Hula*, Allen Seiden stated that, "hula had become connected to the growing tourist trade, transformed from a dance that supplemented meaningful chants to a style of dance with sensual gestures and romantic imagery as the most important components."¹⁰ Hula kitsch really commercialized the ancient, meaningful practice of hula into something cheap, and widely accessible. Unlike other writers or scholars, Seiden failed to criticize the negative cultural effects of kitsch. He believed kitsch was part of the hula revival, which is true in some sense – but what was the reason for the revival? It was the combination of "imperialist nostalgia" and capitalism. Hula kitsch was very popular for a majority of the 20th century. Although not as popular in the present, it still exists in different forms.

Kitsch did not only affect the dance but also the perception of Hawai'i. The hula girl image had already been used before the 1900s, but at the turn of the century the image really exploded, due to tourism promotion. The image became the premier symbol of Hawai'i. Hula dancers and musicians became some of the most popular images used for colored postcards.¹¹ The image was also used in business ads, figurines, and lamps. One of the most recognized uses of the image is the hula girl dashboard figurine with movable hips.¹²

Another interesting observation is the physical appearance of the hula girl. The standard hula girl was depicted as beautiful young woman or girl with a slim upper body and wide hips. In some cases the female body is highly accentuated, creating unrealistic body proportions. The female usually wears a grass, raffia, or cellophane skirt as the bottom garment and a coconut

bra for the top garment. The cellophane skirt became popular in the Hollywood movies of the 1950s.¹³ Coconut bras were never a part of traditional hula. Of course, the hula girl would be adorned with flowers, with a welcoming smile; capturing the "true spirit of aloha". It is a very sensual and romanticized depiction of so called "Hawai'i."

Many depictions use a very light skinned woman or a Caucasian woman. The use of a lighter skinned woman appealed to the Western audience, portraying Hawai'i as American and civilized. This contributed to the figurative displacement of Hawaiians from Hawai'i, a "Hawaiian-less Hawai'i". In *Legendary Hawai'i*, Bacchilega stated that portrayals of Hawai'i showcased the so-called exotic paradise while excluding Hawaiian people. Tourists experienced what they believed to be authentic culture, but in reality they were just experiencing kitsch. The commercial use of the hula girl promoted hula as cultural but it was actually just a means for entertainment value.¹⁴

As mentioned before, Hawaiian people have been moved to the background as secondary characters in the landscape of Hawai'i. The average tourists' experience in Hawai'i is no different than a trip to Disneyland. This applies to the past as well as the present. A tourist comes to Hawai'i, goes sight seeing, and leaves with a vague understanding or misunderstanding of Hawaiian culture. There is a definite divide in the interaction between tourists and Hawaiians/Hawaiian culture.

In Julie Kaomea's article, "A Curriculum of Aloha?" (2000), she revealed that hula kitsch had even made its way into the educational system of Hawai'i. In one of her experiments, she asked children to describe Native Hawaiians. According to the children, Hawaiian women were 'very pretty'; Hawaiians (as a whole) 'ware [wear] different comtumuse [costumes]' and 'play nice music'; they are 'kind' and the 'nicest people [they] know'. In a visual representation of a Hawaiian female, a child drew a stereotypical hula girl.¹⁵

Kaomea's primary focus in her study was on the textbook, *Hawaii the Aloha State* (Bauer 1982).¹⁶ She immediately pointed out the name of the textbook, as it shares its name with numerous books about tourism. Kaomea called this "a critical clue" of what she expected to find within the book.¹⁷

The textbook layout was that of a tourist guide. The chapters were divided by islands with the name of the each chapter being the island name, followed by the island nickname. Kaomea then said that the subsections within chapters were divided by "site-worthy attractions." One subsection said 'Shopping along the main street of Waikiki...is a must for all malihines [malihini] or tourist' and that 'no holiday...is complete without going to at least one luau.'¹⁸ The textbook also included postcard-like photos of Hawaiian "hula girls."¹⁹

It is hard to believe that kitsch culture has even become accepted as authentic by the educational

system in Hawai'i. This could have a great influence on how young Hawaiian children see their culture and their own selves. It teaches Hawaiians to believe in stereotypes and to accept tourism as a normal part of life, a part of the "aloha spirit". On a broader scale, it also teaches Hawaiians that they are naturally hospitable, therefore submissive to others. Kaomea believed that the educational system is grooming the children of Hawai'i, both Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian, to enter the tourist industry in positions of servitude.²⁰

In the case of the Hawaiian female, she is led to believe that she must be as beautiful and thin as the commercialized hula girl; because her body is now an exhibition for tourists. These books put western gender perspectives in the minds of young Hawaiians: the Hawaiian female is destined to become a hula girl because that is what Hawaiian women do. Coupled with stereotyped hospitality, the Hawaiian female has become the ultra submissive female.

The Hawaiian female body is the focal point in Jane Desmond's article, "Invoking 'The Native': Body Politics in Contemporary Hawaiian Tourist Shows"(1997).²¹ Tourist shows have been a main staple of hula kitsch and continue to be a major tourism draw. According to data compiled by the Hawai'i Tourism Authority for the 2011 calendar year, over seven million visitors traveled to Hawai'i. About 41% of those visitors came from the Western United States and 23% from the Eastern United States. Both of these locations provide the majority of tourists to Hawai'i.²² About 30% of Western U.S. visitors and 49% of Eastern U.S. visitors attended a "Polynesian show/luau/hula".²³ Desmond states that these "commercial Hawaiian lū'au both require and feature the visible display of bodies perceived as 'native' or 'Hawaiian' by the mainlander viewing audience." The use of "native" bodies reassures the visitor that Hawai'i is still "Hawaiian."²⁴

As part of her research process, Desmond went to Germaine's Luau in Honolulu. Her experience showed that hula kitsch is still a major factor in tourism. These lū'au companies know what tourists expect "Hawaiians" to be like, so the tourists are given a stereotyped "Hawaiian" fantasy. One of the main points she makes about her lū'au experience is the emphasis on sex and the native body. Her bus driver on the way to the lū'au, "Captain Bob", made an offensive joke about Hawaiian sexuality and he also made the passengers give back rubs to one another.²⁵ Before the start of the show, everybody was forced to give a lei to another person, then give that person, who must be of the opposite sex, a kiss on the cheek. Following the "ceremony," visitors were able to take a picture with one of the male or female "natives." Desmond says this staged photography is the way visitors "mark the encounter with the 'exotic'."²⁶

After overusing the words "ohana" and "aloha" numerous times, the lū'au host forced the audience to honi. Honi is a traditional custom of sharing breath with another person, which is spiritual and sincere. However,

the host used honi in order to continue the sexual context of the show. Hula made its first appearance when 50 female visitors were asked to dance to "Hukilau". Then once again, another session of "honi," followed by three male visitors dancing in coconut bras and fake skirts.

Finally, the "teaching-the-tourist-to-dance motif," as Desmond calls it occurred: a male volunteer was called up to dance with female entertainer. Of course, the male volunteer embarrassed himself, while the lū'au host continued to make sexual references. The result of this performance is the contrast between the non-existent sensuality of the male and the sensuality of the "native" female. The Hawaiian female is portrayed as "primitive" and "closer to nature" thus making them more sexual than westerners.²⁷

Desmond also observed the physical appearance of the dancers. The men were young and muscular, while the women are young and slim. The women were mostly of the hapa-haole (mixed Caucasian) look. She pointed out that it is rare to find an Oriental looking female at these shows, a look that is common in Hawai'i. A "black" (African-American) look is out of the question; Desmond says that Melanesian dancers are rare as well, because tourists could mistake them as African-Americans.²⁸

In contrast, Desmond talks about attending a fundraiser for Mapuana de Silva's hālau the day after the lū'au show. At the fundraiser, there were all types of female "bodies" present: Hawaiian, Haole, Oriental, young, and old. At this event, hula was performed by different varieties of bodies, instead of just one type of body. Unlike the female dancers of the commercial lū'au shows, who are picked by their physical appearance, which must fit the hula girl archetype.²⁹ Once again, the tourists are fed the images they expect to see, a process that continues the perpetuation of the "native female."

The final way the "hula girl" affects Hawaiians is by genderizing Hawai'i as female. In Haunani K. Trask's well-known essay, "Lovely Hula Hands" (1999), she compares the relationship of Hawai'i and tourism to that of a prostitute and pimp. She criticizes capitalism as the factor in the destruction of lands and culture. The tourist industry has exploited Hawaiians and Hawaiian culture, convincing the people of Hawai'i that tourism is a "natural" part of culture.³⁰ This is very similar to what Kaomea said in "A Curriculum of Aloha?"

Trask also argued, "Hawai'i itself is the female object of degraded and victimized sexual value."³¹ She (the land) is purchased and used for industrialism and militarization. As the "prostitute," Hawai'i offers four services: Hula, aloha, u'i (the beauty of young Hawaiians), and the allure of Hawai'i itself. Hula within tourism is without sacredness. It is hyper sexualized and a form of packaged entertainment. Trask also stated that "aloha" has been over used to the point where it has lost its meaning. A powerful word that is unique to Hawaiian language has now been regulated to something that is just tossed around freely, such as the example in Desmond's experience at the lū'au.³² Trask concludes,

"Thus, Hawai'i, like a lovely woman, is there for the taking...Just as the pimp regulates prices and guards the commodity of the prostitute, so the state bargains with developers for access to Hawaiian land and culture."³³

In the article "Military Presence/Missionary Past", the authors use Trask's views on tourism to pertain to militarization. Once again, Hawai'i is the submissive "hula girl," but this time she needs protection from a masculine source: The U.S. military. Hawai'i invites the masculine source to control and protect her.³⁴ As a result, the U.S. military has "protected" a large portion of land in Hawai'i, making Hawai'i the most militarized state in the U.S.

In conclusion, the hula girl image, a product of tourism, has genderized Hawai'i and created a stereotypical view of Hawaiian identity. From the beginning of the Hawai'i tourist industry in the late 1800s until the present, the hula girl has remained the mascot of Hawai'i. One can go to any party supply store and easily find a hula girl costume. It is disappointing that local companies are contributing to the exploitation of Hawaiian culture. The hula girl has greatly affected the identity of the Hawaiian female, turning them from powerful women to submissive girls. The hula girl has feminized the islands of Hawai'i, thus inviting the U.S. military to protect the beautiful damsel in distress. Hawaiians need to remember or realize, that there is nothing natural about tourism or militarism. It is not Hawai'i's fate or destiny. As Lisa Kahaleole Hall writes:

A culture without dignity cannot be conceived of as having sovereign rights, and the repeated marketing of kitsch Hawaiian-ness leads to non-Hawaiians' misunderstanding and degradation of Hawaiian culture and history. Bombarded by such kitsch along with images of leisure and paradise, non-Hawaiians fail to take Hawaiian sovereignty seriously and Hawaiian activism remains invisible to the mainstream.³⁵

If the hula girl and other western stereotypes of Hawai'i can be exterminated, dignity and pride can be reclaimed, not just by Hawaiian women, but for all Hawaiians. Hawaiians should remember that no other person or group could dictate who they think they are. This is what Joseph Poepoe knew when he published the mo'olelo of Pele and Hi'iaka. Hawaiian women are beautiful, powerful, independent, but never submissive, just as Hawai'i is.

Notes:

¹Christine Bacchilega. *Legendary Hawai'i and the Politics of Place: Tradition, Translation, and Tourism* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 66.

²Bacchilega, 68.

³Bacchilega, 102.

⁴Allen Seiden, *The Art of Hula: the Spirit, the History, the Legends*. (Hong Kong: Island Heritage Publishing, 2001), 22.

The term "mo'olelo" is a Hawaiian word. It can be defined as a story that contains humans and spiritual persons, places, and events. It is a blur between history, fiction, metaphor, and mythology. Mo'olelo are one of the most important parts of Hawaiian oral tradition.

⁵Seiden, 22.

⁶Seiden, 23.

⁷Noenoe K. Silva, "I Kū Mau Mau: How Kanaka Maoli Tried to Sustain National Identity Within the United States Political System", *American Studies* 45 no. 3, (2004), 25-26.

⁸Merriam-Webster Online, "kitsch", <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kitsch>.

⁹Adria L. Imada, "Hawaiians on Tour: Hula Circuits through the American Empire", *American Quarterly* 56 no. 1, (2004). 119.

¹⁰Seiden, 84

¹¹Seiden, 86.

¹²Seiden, 92-93.

¹³Seiden, 87.

¹⁴Bacchilega, 17-18.

¹⁵Julie Kaomea, "A Curriculum of Aloha? Colonialism and Tourism in Hawai'i's Elementary Textbooks", *Curriculum Inquiry* 30 no. 3, (2000), 320.

¹⁶*Hawaii the Aloha State* (1982), *Hawaii Our Island State*, (1979) *Early Hawaiian Life* (1981).

¹⁷Kaomea, 325.

¹⁸Kaomea, 325-326.

¹⁹Kaomea, 330.

²⁰Kaomea, 335.

²¹Desmond's chooses to focus on Euro-American visitors, instead of including Japanese visitors.

²²Hawai'i Tourism Authority, "2011 Factsheet", (2011), 1. <http://www.hawaii-tourismauthority.org/default/assets/File/2011%20State%20Factsheet%20updated%208-21-12.pdf>

²³Hawai'i Tourism Authority, "2011 VSAT Report Activity Participation", (2011), 141, 143. [http://www.hawaii-tourismauthority.org/default/assets/File/reports/visitor-satisfaction/2011%20VSAT%20Report\(2\).pdf](http://www.hawaii-tourismauthority.org/default/assets/File/reports/visitor-satisfaction/2011%20VSAT%20Report(2).pdf)

²⁴Jane C. Desmond, "Invoking 'The Native': Body Politics in Contemporary Hawaiian Tourist Shows", *The MIT Press* 41 no. 5, (1997), 84.

²⁵Desmond, 93.

²⁶Desmond, 94.

²⁷Desmond, 95.

²⁸Desmond, 96.

²⁹Desmond, 96.

³⁰Haunani-Kay Trask, *From A Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 137.

³¹Trask, 143.

³²Trask, 144.

³³Trask, 145.

³⁴Turnbull, Phyllis and Kathy E. Ferguson. "Military Presence/Missionary Past: The Historical Construction of Masculine Order and Feminine Hawai'i" *Social Process in Hawai'i: Sites, Identities, and Voices* 38 (1997), 98.

³⁵Lisa Kahaleole Hall, " 'Hawaiian at Heart' and Other Fictions", *The Contemporary Pacific* 17 no. 2, (2005), 409.

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