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Aloha America: Hula Circuits Through the U.S. Empire

by Adria L. Imada. 2012. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 374 pp. text, appendices, notes, glossary, bibliography, index. $24.95 paper. doi:10.1017/S0149767714000126

"One afternoon in 1889, eight young Hawaiian women dressed in long white holokū (gowns) and pinned up their long hair. They were to dance hula that afternoon at King David Kalākaua's boathouse, Healani, a few blocks from the royal palace" (29). So begins the epic *mo*'*olelo* (story) of hula's travels through the U.S. empire. Kini Kapahukulaokamamalu (Jennie Wilson) was one of those eight young women who danced that day. In 1892, a year after Kalākaua's death, Kini, three other female dancers, and two male musicians, supported by an American promoter, left Hawai'i to tour North America and Europe, presenting hula in mass-entertainment venues away from the Kingdom for the first time. While on tour, the group heard about the demise of their Hawaiian Kingdom at the hands of American business barons in 1893, and several of the group were still away from Hawai'i when word arrived of the islands' 1898 annexation to the U.S. In 1959, the Territory of Hawai'i became the fiftieth U.S. state. Throughout this political upheaval, hula tours, populated by female hula dancers like Kini, traveled across the continental United States and Europe. In *Aloha America: Hula Circuits Through the U.S. Empire*, Adria Imada examines these hula circuit performers' instrumental roles in establishing U.S. political control over Hawai'i. In the process, she also reveals how these circuits have endured to the present day. In October 2012, for example, New York City Center's *Fall for Dance* festival included a Honolulu hula *hālau* (hula troupe) on its eclectic dance program, and September saw the five winning Hawai'i *hālau* from the 2012 Merrie Monarch Hula Festival travel and perform with the winners of *Na Hoku Hanohano* (Hawai'i's Grammy Awards) to sold-out crowds in Tokyo, Japan.[1]

Imada's history, written from within American studies, fills important gaps in hula's history. Focusing on commercial hula popularized through early twentieth-century tourism markets, Imada unearths a story of colonial encounter disguised by metaphors of Native welcome and friendship. *Aloha America* uncovers the imperialist mobilization of Hawaiian aloha through hula—glossed as "mutuality, intimacy, and hospitality" (9)—to disguise the violence imposed through U.S. empire-building in Hawai'i. "Rather than being seen as violent and aggressive, colonial encounters between Hawaiians and Americans were frequently imagined as points of intimate contact, with Hawaiians freely giving aloha to Americans, and Americans eagerly accepting these gifts of hospitality," Imada writes (9). She argues that by providing a mask of intimacy behind which empire becomes a "way of life," hula performers literally and performatively produced an imperial touristic script of aloha at on-island tourist performance sites and through off-island hula circuits. As Imada points out, the imperial script required hula dancers' bodies and performances to present a nation that was foreign, but not alien: "Hula and the young women who performed this dance served as metonyms for the Hawaiian Islands, and they made the territory intelligible to Americans.... The islands were not so subtly coded as sexually submissive spaces, waiting to be exploited and conquered" (180). Tracing dancers' performances and the imperial scripts that compelled many of these performances, Imada shows how hula entertainers ultimately participated in showing once-skeptical Americans that the Territory of Hawai'i should be incorporated into the U.S. as a full-fledged state.

Imada complicates this tale of colonial encounter and imperial desire by simultaneously examining hula performers' counter-colonial practices. How, when, and why performers participated in producing the prescribed touristic scripts (or critically failed to accurately produce such scripts) are some of the most ambitious aspects of this study. Recognizing hula as a "potent cultural and economic opportunity structure" through which women were able to "earn cultural capital and, occasionally, even a

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living wage, while charting their own desires for fashion, beauty, and travel" (4), Imada establishes Kini and the other female hula dancers as modern agents. Through hula, she suggests, performers were given the opportunity to create individual subjectivities informed by, and critical of, the imperial atmosphere characteristic of Hawai'i–U.S. relations at the start of the twentieth century.

Each of the book's five chapters is organized around one or more historical figures located in particular performance sites. The first three chapters broadly define the social and political scenarios of Hawai'i's territorial period. Focusing on the figure of Kini, a *maka*'*āin*'*ana* (commoner) dancer in King Kalākaua's transnational Honolulu court, readers follow Kini on hula's first major global tour (1892), which included the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago, sites in Europe, vaudeville and dime museum stages across the Western U.S. and the American south, and British Columbia. The dancer and her colleagues experience the curious fascination their exotically foreign (and supposedly "disgraceful") bodies held for a consuming American (and European) public. In the third chapter, readers are presented with a close reading of the gendered power dynamics at play in the hula circuits, in which Native Hawaiian males are cast as cultural brokers, and female dancers are cast as wage laborers. Throughout these initial chapters, Imada parallels U.S. ambivalence toward the possibility of Hawaiian statehood with negative stereotypes of hula performers and the entertainment circuits through which they traveled.

Imada creates a turning point for her narrative in the fourth chapter by shifting her examination toward the hula entertainer as "Hawaiian ambassador" (occurring in the 1930s as entertainers left vaudeville stages and Hawai'i's territorial government recognized hula's promotional value). Armed with her newly respectable status, the hula entertainer's commodification made her uniquely able to promote Hawai'i's economic and political concerns through what Imada calls an "imagined intimacy." This imagined intimacy naturalized and allegorized Hawai'i's colonization by the U.S. as "Native women beckoning non-Native outsiders to the islands.… Hawaiians who could be reviled as undesirable 'primitives' in social and political discourse off-stage came to be imagined as largely assimilable and desirable through hula performances and the gendered bodies associated with hula," Imada explains (67).

In the fifth chapter, Imada analyzes how the U.S. military mobilized the tourist luau and its attendant spirit of aloha, cultivating an "imperial hospitality." This concept was central to the development of Hawai'i from U.S. territory to fiftieth state. Analyzing military films and photographs, Imada affirms the fixed nature of the imperial scripts that Hawaiians were expected to perform. She discloses U.S. military investments in producing narratives of intimacy and hospitality, in which manufactured images crafted a fantasy of colonial intimacy: "the military camera was not merely a tool of propaganda, but a regulatory tool of peace that sought to integrate rather than separate populations. It framed Hawai'i as a site of militouristic pleasure, editing out the war, militarization of the territory, and frequent violence that erupted between soldiers and locals" (231). Following a pattern set up in previous chapters, Imada first establishes a script imposed onto the performing Hawaiian bodies, then proposes a counter-reading. In the traces of the performers' experiences and actions, she locates "liberties" and "muted critiques" of the imposed scripts.

Aloha America comes out of a fertile moment of decolonizing scholarship in Native and Indigenous studies intent upon critically contesting dominant histories of settler colonialism. The 1970s witnessed a renaissance of Hawaiian cultural and linguistic practices, as well as an intensive reclamation of Hawaiian land rights. Both of these projects—cultural and political—coalesced in the present-day Hawaiian sovereignty and self-determination movements that have laid the groundwork for decolonizing critiques. Noenoe Silva (2004) and Jonathan Osorio (2002) in particular have established a decolonizing methodology that is partially located in critiquing colonial archives and in highlighting knowledge produced via Native archives. These authors argue that Hawaiian-language archives, which include poetry and songs, stories, newspapers, petitions, and even performances, prove a continual Native Hawaiian resistance to American colonization in distinction to the dominant historiographies that portray Hawaiian acquiescence

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to colonial institutions. Imada's monograph belongs to, and is in conversation with, this genealogy of critical Native scholarship.[2]

In addition to these decolonizing histories, *Aloha America* is indebted to Diana Taylor's (2003) theorization of the archive and the repertoire as two different, yet related, means of storing and mediating knowledge—one through history's material documents (newspapers, maps, written documents) and the other through scenarios of embodied performances ("the gestures, attitudes, and tones not reducible to language" [22]). Poring over official archives in Hawai'i and the mainland U.S., Imada discovered that while hula performers' bodies were hypervisible, they were also overwhelmingly anonymous. Due to stated archival limitations, she found herself "working in the interstices of archive and field, reconstituting and creating new archives with insights gained from hula performance and ethnographic research in hula communities" (21). Using a combination of primary sources in both existence and created through her research process, as well as available secondary sources, Imada focused on analyzing hula dancers' actions, in particular live or mediated performance contexts. Her analyses foreground the Hawaiians' often unpredictable and sometimes counter-colonial responses to the U.S.'s imperialist scripts.

Imada's stated intention, to focus on the behaviors, gestures, and experiences of Hawaiian performers, will resonate with dance scholars who are invested in dancing as a cultural and representational practice by which bodies assert bodily signification, and through which cultural change is manifested.[3] While other scholarly publications on hula examine the social transformation of Hawai'i and hula through its attendant myths—of "paradise" in the case of Elizabeth Buck (1994) and the "ideal native" in Jane Desmond (1997, 1999), ultimately these studies are not invested in connecting hula performers' range of individual responses (in the past and present) to hula's touristic scripts. Of these texts, dance scholars will be most familiar with Jane Desmond's *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World* (1999), which focuses on ways that a developing twentieth-century tourist industry produced racial and gendered Native identities through postcards, photographs, advertising imagery, and live performances of hula dancers, to establish support of the islands' continued occupation by the U.S. Desmond examines the complex ways in which bodies (as assumed repositories of truth) are perpetually tied to articulations of social difference. Her examination of tourism through close readings of live touristic performances and archival research of tourism marketing techniques, and their translation into popular culture, provides the groundwork upon which much of Imada's research builds.

In contrast to Desmond, however, Imada foregrounds the "subjugated" or "low-ranking knowledge" of the body, and in particular, of specific (colonized, feminized) hula dancing bodies, as a means of initiating a far more complex conversation about touristic hula than has yet been proffered. Reading many of the same images as Desmond, Imada reveals the human experiences behind such images by finding and interviewing surviving hula dancers and their families. At the same time she distinguishes between hula (i.e., acculturated hula) as a commodified imperial instrument through which Hawai'i ultimately became a U.S. state, and hula as a genealogy of indigenous knowledge transmitted through performed repertoires that are impervious to capitalism's (and imperialism's) commodification. Imada notes, "hula *genealogy* was an inalienable possession that could not be bought or sold, but could only be attained through strict training and adherence to cultural protocol" (77, italics in original). Her theorizing of the ways in which hula does and does not enter capitalist transactions provides a valuable entry point into understanding how different cultural experiences can constitute unstable renderings of aloha's imperial script. She also fashions a powerful argument for the reconsideration of commercial hula's validity in a post-renaissance hula culture that celebrates pre-European *kahiko* (meaning old) hula as being more "authentic." The book's greatest accomplishment, however, is in unearthing the personal stories of performers long overlooked, and then utilizing those stories to illuminate performers' often contrary responses to the hula circuit's touristic structure.

Aloha America contributes to both dance and Native studies by elaborating on the intersection between dance as the means through which traditions stored in bodies are

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transmitted through present-day scenarios and Jacqueline Shea Murphy's conceptualization of indigenous dance as document. In *The Natives Have Never Stopped Dancing* (2007), Shea Murphy outlines multiple functions of indigenous dance practices "as a way of researching, an epistemological 'way of knowing,' with theoretical insight and historical legitimacy, and as itself embodied documentation, with archival value" (10). Similar to Taylor (2003), who advocates for the archive and repertoire as overlapping rather than hierarchical systems of knowledge, Murphy's conceptualization of dance as document argues for the valorization of indigenous dance as containing and transmitting essential cultural knowledge via performance. Furthermore, Shea Murphy proposes this embodied knowledge is in itself a valuable research method. Imada invokes Shea Murphy's conceptualization of indigenous dance as transmitting essential cultural knowledge as she "reads" hula dancers' movements in imperial theatrical/tourist structures. Reading against the grain, Imada suggests imperial structures as being unexpected spaces through which Native performers experienced unprecedented freedoms and continuities of cultural repertoires—even as these same structures instrumentalized Native performers for imperial desires. One example of this process lies in the performers' mainland utilization of the Hawaiian language. Readers learn that even as Hawaiian language speakers experienced strict prohibitions at home from 1896–1940s, entertainers freely spoke Hawaiian to one another while on tour. They took advantage of the *kaona* (hidden meaning) embedded in Hawaiian *mele* (songs') poetic lyrics—and through language, inserted counter-colonial politics into tourist structures.

However, dance scholars will be sorely disappointed by extremely limited descriptions of the dances performed and a lack of choreographic analysis in *Aloha America*. Readers who are unfamiliar with hula will not have a better idea of what hula circuit dancers did on stage after reading than before they began. Imada analyzes the poetry of *mele* (songs) by paying particular attention to the hidden meanings of *kaona*, draws substantially from oral histories of performers and family, reads archival documents, and describes photographs rather than analyzing hula dancers' actual choreographic choices during performances. Instead of investigating how individual hula choreographies might have participated in producing the counter-colonial scenarios and critiques of American imperialism, Imada mobilizes hula as a cultural practice in order to research imperial oppression and Native resistance. In this history the performers and cultural brokers are "political and cultural actors who wanted to have fun, dress up, and play," and their actual choreographies remain hidden (19).[4]

Imada's approach to hula rehearses a tension that hula scholars commonly negotiate: how to write about this embodied practice without reproducing the uncritical descriptions—the "swaying hips" and "graceful hands" exemplified through a century of Western writing—that have effectively removed the actions of the dancing body from the essential historical knowledge held within it.[5] In response, many Native (and non-Native) scholars alike privilege a chant or *mele*'s words, focusing on the multiple and hidden meanings within a poetic lyric, or explicating a hula style's social context. These scholars, argue as Imada does, that within hula's range of sacred and secular performance contexts, "bodily movements [are] less critical then the chanted poetry that communicate[s] the births and achievements of chiefs, record [s] the genealogies of high chiefs back to the akua (gods), and relay[s] Hawaiian epics. In these performances, *gesticulation [is] appreciated, but not necessary*" (32, italics added).[6] While there are some, including Adrienne Kaeppler (1993) and Desmond (1997), whose writings include description and analysis of some hula dances, there is little scholarship that attempts to accomplish the task of describing, analyzing, and contextualizing hula choreographies within their social/historical moments. Scholarship that foregrounds the danced actions *within* appropriate historical and cultural contexts is still needed for hula.

However, even if Adria Imada does not directly engage with choreographic analysis to construct her argument, the text makes a substantial contribution to a more complicated and nuanced understanding of hula's relationship to American imperialism throughout the twentieth century. For example, *Aloha America* contributes to ethico-political concerns related to the discursive and real-world economic

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investments of "world dance" practices, as outlined by Susan Leigh Foster and the contributors to *Worlding Dance* (2009). In particular, Imada's text engages with key questions that Marta Savigliano proposes in her essay, "Worlding Dance and Dancing Out There in the World." Savigliano asks, "What kinds of institutional investments, technical knowledges, economic interests, aesthetic and ethical assumptions, political arrangements, pleasures and desires participate in the process of worlding Dance?" (Foster 2009, 163).

Just as Hawai'i has been incorporated into the U.S., so too has hula been incorporated into the collection of practices that circulates under the "world dance" rubric. *Aloha America* traces the political, cultural, and economic origins of hula's entry onto the world's dance stage, highlighting the complicated ways in which performers have been instrumental in hula's commodification and colonization. At the same time, Imada's focus on hula entertainers' corporeal movements illustrates the range of rebellions that also characterize hula performers' counter-colonial participation in hula's global economic circuits and imperial scripts. Hula is ultimately revealed as a contested site upon which multiple desires have been, and continue to be, negotiated—imperial, economic, cultural. While the specifics of these negotiations are particular to hula, they also belong to a range of negotiations that are constantly occurring within the "worlding" of dance. Global circuits that were established as a result of curiosity at the end of the nineteenth century are shown to be routes still traveled by performers.

In an epilogue, Imada addresses how aspects of present-day self-determination movements have been inserted into hula's contemporary global circuit. At the same time, she traces contemporary negotiations of hula within present-day tourist structures. She sets her comments within the context of the renowned Merrie Monarch Festival hula competition. "Rather than altogether rejecting tourism, these performers savvily negotiate the seeming contradiction between Native self-determination and their participation in a market-oriented economy that has commodified their land, bodies, and cultural practices" (262). As a result, present-day hula circuits are revealed to illuminate hula in a genealogy of decolonizing corporeal practices whose enactments can rewrite imperial scripts, scenarios, and desires, reframing circulations of power through a range of embodied actions.

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Notes

1. Macaulay (2012) and "Hula Fest Returns to Japan" (2012).

2. See, for example, Deloria (1998), Kame' eleihiwa (1992), Osorio (2002), Shea Murphy (2007), Silva (2004), Smith (1999), Teaiwa (1994), Trask (1999).

3. See Foster (1996).

4. There are, however, a large number of photographs of hula dances that provide a visual sense of what some of these dances looked like at a particular moment.

5. This tension is certainly not limited to hula scholarship, but will be familiar to many scholars of indigenous performance.

6. See, for example, Kaeppler (1993), Kame'eleihiwa (1992), and Silva (2004).

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