

Aloha Ahoy: Tourism and Nostalgia at Honolulu Harbor

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Every year over six million tourists arrive in Honolulu making the island of O'ahu the place in the world with 'the greatest number of tourists per square mile' (Wilson and Dissanayake, 1996, p.7). Out of that staggering number, 230,495, or 3.6% of the state of Hawai'i's total number of annual visitors, were out-of-state cruise ship passengers in 2003. In a move to profit from the arrival of these passengers, the harbor's \$100 million, 200,000-square-foot Aloha Tower Marketplace carefully stages a 'Boat Days Again!' arrival, which emulates the spontaneous Boat Day, or Steamer Day, festivities of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s when cheering crowds would greet luxury liners arriving from the U.S. mainland.

Today, tourism at Honolulu Harbor is structured around a nostalgic vision of Boat Day and Hawai'i's pre-statehood history in general.¹ Nostalgia works as what Kenneth Burke calls a 'terministic screen' (1968, p.50), that is, as a filter that enforces a principle of continuity between the present and the past by ignoring disruptive and ideologically ambiguous events like the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893, the decimation of the indigenous Hawaiian population, and the inglorious arrival of tens of thousands of indentured Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Philippine laborers destined for Hawai'i's sugar cane and pineapple plantations.

Instead, nostalgia sustains touristic myths about Hawai'i as an uncomplicated holiday destination. In the present-day Boat Day welcoming rituals, a particular aspect of this nostalgia, namely the longing for the exclusive world of the affluent travelers aboard luxury liners, is asserted as a collective desire for the upper-class tourist experience associated with the interbellum period before air travel made Hawai'i affordable for middle

¹ Hawai'i became the 50th U.S. state on August 21, 1959.

class tourists. Narratively, in touristic texts and non-texts, this desire is represented as a norm for accumulating cultural capital in the Western world. One 1928 Hawaii Tourist Bureau advertisement, for example, caters to this desire by claiming ‘The Smart Winter Throng is Gathering at Waikiki’ (in Brown, 1985, p.37), indicating the distinct utopian aspect of nostalgic desire as a longing for inclusion in the upper echelons of society. The interbellum period is here associated with simpler and more stable times, in particular in regard to social and cultural roles, and this perception is among the nostalgic elements that serve to naturalize the tourists’ desire to engage in leisurely activities while the local population, naturally, work to ensure their comfort. The principle of continuity therefore facilitates the way nostalgia works as a terministic screen because it dissimulates the disruptive effects of historical events and prevents counter-narratives from emerging.

The nostalgic desire to emulate the experience of the affluent elite of the interbellum era is represented and re-created, both in texts such as travel literature and advertisements, as well as in non-texts like posters and souvenirs. The contemporary popularity of vintage travel posters in Hawai’i, and the overwhelming use of them in the décor and merchandise of Aloha Tower Marketplace, bears testimony to the Western meta-narrative, or grand narrative, whose values structure this discourse. By Western meta-narrative I am referring to the European and Euro-American discursive appropriation and silencing of the other in what Michel Foucault calls ‘the tyranny of globalising discourses’ (1983, p.83). It is important to stress that the touristic discourse does not simply describe the West’s encounter with Hawai’i; it must be seen as a major phenomenon of social power. In terms of colonialism, globalizing discourses involve the power to silence the other, as Gayatri C. Spivak has argued (1988), as well as the power to incorporate the colonized into the dominant culture’s paradigm by annihilating ‘a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in

themselves' (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986, p.3). Hawaiian activist Haunani-Kay Trask thus writes, 'as a colonized people, we are colonized to the extent that we are unaware of our oppression' (1993, p.195). Dissenting voices like Trask's, however, are effectively silenced by the hegemonic structures of the grand narrative because it is in the interest of Hawai'i's post-war economic reliance on tourism to represent Hawai'i as a soft other: a libidinal, welcoming, feminized, dancing woman. Trask writes, 'above all, Hawai'i is 'she', the Western image of the Native 'female' in her magical allure' (1993, p.180). The bronze-skinned, hip-swaying hula girl in coconut bra and grass skirt² has thus attained an emblematic status as a representation of Hawai'i and, in narrative terms, has become a synecdoche that signifies all of Hawai'i.

Furthermore, a dominant narrative that emerges in colonial situations, such as the grand narrative of Hawai'i as the 'Land of Aloha'³, becomes in itself 'the representation of power, and its teleology is associated with the global role of the West' (Edward Said, 1993, p.273). The meta-narrative is incorporated into colonialism's overall hegemonic structure and sustains its values. It follows that the tourist gaze on Hawai'i is systematically and socially organized by Western experience for, as John Urry argues, 'to be a tourist is one of the characteristics of the 'modern' experience' (2002, p.4). It is precisely the Western experience that dominates the tourist gaze and that seeps through the epistemological layers of the experience of colonization itself. Trask explains: 'of course, many Hawaiians do not see tourism as part of their colonization. Thus tourism is viewed as providing jobs, not as a form of cultural prostitution' (1993, p.195). Additionally, tourism prevents social change in Hawai'i by confining the local population to a position of servitude in relation to the Western world for, although the average cost of living in Hawai'i is 35-40%

² Neither coconut bras nor grass skirts are endemic to Hawaiian culture.

³ The trope, 'The Land of Aloha', is part of the touristic meta-narrative's vocabulary. Other contemporary tropes include 'Spirit of Aloha', 'Polynesian hospitality', and 'Aloha Spoken Here'.

higher than on the U.S. mainland, the majority of jobs in the tourist industry only earn minimum wages⁴. Lorrin A. Thurston's statement to *Sunset Magazine* in 1926 is therefore also characteristic of Hawai'i's economic and political position today: 'as a business asset, as a national playground and as the key to peace in the Pacific, Hawai'i is of tremendous importance' (cited in Noyes, 2003, p.63).

Honolulu Harbor is a prime location for observing how Hawai'i's dual role as business asset and playground come together in creating a fantasy arrival at one of the world's most celebrated tourist destinations. Both narratively (metaphorically) and empirically (in reality), harbors are meaningful boundaries between land and sea. They are markers between the ocean's horizontal flats and the city's vertical landmarks as well as places of dialectical movement: the coming and going of boats and passengers, the import and export of cargo and, in that sense, they are the very physical, situated places of exchange between the exotic and the familiar.

As meeting grounds, however, harbors also function as places of cultural contact⁵, and Honolulu is particularly interesting in this respect because the touristic discourse represents Hawai'i as an idyllic melting pot of shared cultures and ethnicities. Honolulu is touted in both literary and touristic fiction as the place where 'East meets West' - an expression celebrating Hawai'i's 'melting pot environment' (Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2005) - and where 'Hawaii, romantic - beautiful' (travel poster, 1920s. In Blackburn, 1996, p.31) with its 'Polynesian hospitality' (a tour company) makes it a 'Year Round Playground' (travel poster, 1920s. In Brown, 2003, p.8). Here, the touristic meta-narrative sustains the American melting pot philosophy of inevitable assimilation to the American way of life. Its concern with homogenizing the culturally diverse local population denies the contradictions and racial antagonisms that exist within Hawai'i, in particular in regard to World War II, even making one writer assert that the

⁴ See Hao 2005.

⁵ Mary Louise Pratt notably uses the term 'contact zones' (1992, p.5).

war resulted in racial harmony: 'here the war had left no ... scars. It had consolidated all the races on the islands as Hawaiians' (May Sarton, 1959, p.305). In the grand narrative, in short, 'Hawaiian' means any local inhabitant, regardless of race and ethnicity.

Having thus established how nostalgia functions as an oppressive terministic screen within the touristic meta-narrative on Hawai'i, we need to look at some examples from texts and non-texts to see how it works. Nostalgia's principle of continuity perpetuates colonial hegemony both in texts and in symbolic action like rituals. We must therefore consider the persuasive force of these phenomena in the representation of Hawai'i as the 'Land of Aloha'.

In the early days of sea travel, arrival at Honolulu Harbor was a much-anticipated moment 'after two thousand miles of watery solitude' (Twain, 1981, p.452). Victorian travel writer Isabella Bird inspired prospective visitors with an exhilarated description of seeing Honolulu in 1873:

And beyond the reef and beyond the blue, nestling among coconut trees and bananas, umbrella trees and breadfruits, oranges, mangoes, hibiscus, algaroba, and passion-flowers, almost hidden in the deep, dense greenery, was Honolulu. Bright blossom of a summer sea! Fair Paradise of the Pacific! (1964, p.14)

Bird's exhilaration is a far cry from the terse diary entry made by a New England missionary wife, Laura Fish Judd, who wrote of her arrival at Honolulu in 1828:

There! I see the town of Honolulu, a mass of brown huts, looking precisely like so many haystacks in the country; not one white cottage, no church spire, not a garden nor a tree to be seen save the grove of coconuts. (1928, p.2)

Bird saw an exotic Paradise; Judd saw an uncultivated, un-Christian land.

Today's Hawai'i-bound travelers can testify that Bird's vision of Honolulu as a verdant, fragrant garden of Eden has prevailed and continues to be repeated and endlessly reproduced on everything from coffee mugs to hotel key cards. Nevertheless, Judd's vision has also prevailed, but in subtler ways, through the continuing colonization and Westernization of Hawai'i. During the 1800s, Christian missionaries and American businessmen imposed the English language, Christianity, and Western culture, and politically undermined what was once a sovereign kingdom. Moreover, the effects of Western contact decimated the indigenous population, and today only 3.65% of Honolulu's estimated 372,000 inhabitants are native Hawaiians⁶. Yet, smiling 'Hawaiians' welcome overseas visitors on every poster and travel brochure although most people labeled 'Hawaiian' today are either Pacific Islanders or of mixed ethnic heritage⁷. However, in the grand narrative on Hawai'i as the 'Land of Aloha' such facts are ignored. What matters is to maintain the nostalgic illusion of Hawai'i as the 'Paradise of the Pacific' (Bird, 1964, p.14).

Hostile to distracting counter-narratives, the principle of continuity thus governs the (neo)colonial paradigm within which Boat Day celebrations are reenacted for the benefit of debarking cruise line passengers at Honolulu Harbor today. The Boat Day, or Steamer Day, phenomenon is a nostalgic reference to the heyday of the great ocean steamships which used to bring passengers, cargo, and mail to Hawai'i from Los Angeles and San Francisco. This weekly event started in the 1870s, and it became a highly ritualized affair between the two world wars (Beechert, 1991, p.118). Popular writer Don Blanding captured the Boat Day euphoria with these words:

⁶ At the time of Captain James Cook's landfall in 1778, an estimated 400,000 to 1,000,000 Hawaiians lived in Hawai'i. By 1922 there were 24,000 pure Hawaiians alive (Noyes, 2003, p.79). In the 2000 U.S. census, 239,655 people in the state of Hawai'i identified themselves as Hawaiian. The latter number should be considered in conjunction with the demographic fact that roughly 30% of Hawai'i's population is of mixed racial descent (Ching, 2004, p.36).

⁷ Hawaiian ethnicity has been of political importance throughout Hawai'i's post-contact history. As I am writing this paper in spring 2005, the United States Senate is considering the Native Hawaiian Federal Recognition Bill, which, if approved, will allow Native Hawaiians to create their own government and seek sovereignty from the United States.

My first impression was that the town had attended a masquerade party that night before and had remained in motley to greet the steamer (...). The pier was a garden of gay blossoming, and the expression common to all faces was an honest smile. The confusion of landing swept everyone into swirls of laughing, crying and chattering humanity. A persistent fragrance of flowers dominated the smell of oil, wood, steam and dirt from the harbor. Flowers were everywhere, bouquets, baskets, and, most interestingly of all, garlands of flowers elaborately woven in designs of many colors. A feeling that was warm, hospitable and welcoming flowed from the crowd to the ship, enveloping stranger and friend alike. (1930, pp.31-32)

The popularity of Boat Day declined after air travel made mass tourism possible, but the nostalgia for Boat Day is now rewritten in a commercial context. The Aloha Tower Marketplace at the foot of Aloha Tower welcomes today's cruise passengers with a staged version of the original spontaneous rejoicing. Passengers disembark through a restored terminal building which features a long mural of historic Boat Day scenes. The latter prepares the passengers for the Boat Day arrival staged outside by contextualizing the present experience within the meaningful, nostalgic frame of the past. Once outside on the vacant pier, the passengers are greeted by tourist guides in aloha attire who give each passenger a fragrant lei, while a musician sings and plays the ukulele, and a couple of hula dancers perform. A professional photographer provides photo opportunities for the tourists in the company of the dancers in front of Aloha Tower. The affair is discreetly overseen by uniformed security guards and entirely ignored by the few local residents who happen to pass by on their way to one of the Marketplace's eateries.

Aloha Tower Marketplace even offers a Boat Day arrival for tourists who have arrived in Hawai'i by airplane. Busses splendidly decorated with palm trees and huge hibiscuses arrive at the front of Aloha Tower Marketplace and unload passengers near the terminal building. They

congregate under the Boat Day Bazaar arch and watch a performance by the ukulele player and the hula dancers. These passengers have to pay individually for a photo opportunity with the hula girls, but, depending on the tour group, some of them are treated to a drink of passion-guava punch before guides direct them towards over seventy shops and restaurants inside the Marketplace. Here, shoppers can indulge in neatly displayed touristic merchandise or enjoy a taste of Pacific Rim cuisine on the open-air food veranda overlooking the harbor. Reprints of vintage Matson Navigation travel posters decorate the tabletops and walls creating a unity in consumption on several levels, and it is indeed the only place on the pier where locals and tourists can be seen consuming similar products and services.

But what exactly is it that makes a boat arrival at Honolulu so much more unique, indeed so much more ‘authentic’, than a swift touchdown on the airport tarmac just a few miles away? Or, put differently, what anticipated experiences does the seaport offer the tourist, and how are those experiences met?

In order to consider possible answers to those questions, we need to be reminded that nostalgia is a powerful ideological tool because it selects and reproduces certain aspects of the past (such as the warm welcoming of affluent passengers aboard luxury steamers in the 1920s) and entirely ignores others (for example, the boat arrival of thousands of indentured laborers from East and South East Asia)⁸.

John Frow pointedly asserts, ‘nostalgia for a lost authenticity is a paralyzing structure of historical reflection’ (1991, p.135). Nostalgia is also paralyzing in terms of social change, as Frow argues, because nostalgia, like the concept ‘tradition’, is an ongoing interpretation of the past based on values and political structures in the present. The economic, political, and

⁸ Jon Goss rightly points out that, at Aloha Tower Marketplace, ‘no mention is made of the thousands of Asian immigrants who also arrived by boat to Hawaii – and for whom the Aloha Tower also was a vital symbol’ (1996, p.229).

social values espoused by the Western meta-narrative on Hawai'i perpetuate the colonial hegemonic structures by conceptually locking the local population in a service-oriented position vis-à-vis the tourist. In this constellation, there is little room for social change, for 'tourism was grafted upon the existing plantation economy for the benefit of outsiders and the local elite,' explains tourism researcher Luciano Minerbi (1996, p.190). Hawai'i's postcolonial economic reliance on the tourist industry thus reinforces the terms of economic and political inequality already introduced during colonial times with the plantation economy.

The power of the Western meta-narratives to represent Hawai'i as a playground for tourists profits from a colonial tradition in which first the British and later the American appropriation of the Hawaiian Islands and the overthrow of the Hawaiian kingdom in 1893 are (re)presented as natural and mutually profitable events both for outsiders and for the local population. In addition to the outlawing of the Hawaiian language after the 1893 coup, this colonial discourse also involves a radical rewriting of Hawai'i's history, which silences voices of resistance and dissent. Hawaiian scholar Noenoe K. Silva observes, 'historiography is one of the most powerful discourses that justifies the continued occupation of Hawai'i by the United States today' (2004, p.9). Colonial historiography at Honolulu Harbor is, in other words, an effort to ignore local resistance to assimilation. Thus, museum-style placards at the harbor celebrate the legacy of King Kalakaua as a man of (Western) modernity, depicted at a poker table in the company of Robert Louis Stevenson, while Queen Lili'uokalani, whose resistance to annexation efforts led to the 1893 coup, is ignored⁹.

Colonialism is a decisive factor in the narrative structure that essentializes the West as subject in the meta-narrative on Hawai'i while otherizing the colonial subject. As Spivak argues, the relations between

⁹ Queen Lili'uokalani ruled after her brother Kalakaua's death in 1891. On January 17, 1893, U.S. military troops aided a group of local American businessmen in forcing her to step down. She was put under house arrest after a counter-coup failed, and Hawai'i was annexed as a U.S. territory on August 12, 1898.

colonial desire, power, and subjectivity are conveniently obfuscated in the persuasive re-presentation and representation of the other as mute (1988, pp.275-8): ‘the staging of the world in representation – its scene of writing, its *Darstellung* – dissimulates the choice of and need for ‘heroes’, paternal proxies, agents of power – *Vertretung*’ (Spivak, 1988, p.279). This process is particularly evident in the colonial discourse on Hawai’i. American vaudeville ballads from the 1910s such as ‘They’re Wearin’ ‘Em Higher in Hawaii’ (pronounced ‘Ha-why-ya’) and ‘Oh, How She Could Yacki Hacki Wiki Waki Woo (That’s Love in Honolu)’ (quoted in Brown, 2004, p.58) are examples of the patronymic, Western voice which trivializes and otherizes Hawaiians. This type of representation of Hawai’i has proven remarkably resilient over time, for even today travel posters and advertisements exoticize Hawaiian culture as statically feminized, pliant, warm, soft, moist, fruity and flowery, and the local population as brown, smiling people playing in the sun. As one advertisement says, ‘Captain Cook discovered unspoiled Polynesia. Now it’s your turn’ (*Spirit of Aloha*, 2004, p.73).

Before discussing further implications of colonialism and the Western meta-narrative on Hawai’i, it is worthwhile for a moment to consider the semiotics of the ‘tourist gaze’ (John Urry, 2002) and how its decoding of touristic signs and markers reinforces nostalgic desire. Tourists look for signs wherever they go: ‘All over the world the unsung armies of semiotics, the tourists, are fanning out in search of signs’, Jonathan Culler observes (1988, p.155). Learning how to appreciate the meaning of exotic signs and by participating in their exchange are ways for the tourist to experience an empowerment, which is epistemologically encapsulated within the lingering imperialism that remains ‘where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices’ (Said, 1993, p.9).

Travel posters from the early 1920s onward overwhelmingly show

tourists, blonde women in particular, surfing or riding outrigger canoes in the company of local beach boys. Suggestive poster texts like ‘Come, ride the surf at Waikiki’ (in Brown, 2003, p.16), ‘Hawaii ... Where the Action is!’ (in Brown, 2003, p.31), and ‘Dancing and romancing to sweet Hawaiian music’ (in Brown, 2003, p.50) appeal as invitations to join the locals and engage in what is perceived as the Hawaiian way of life which, apparently, is deliciously free from social conventions about intimate physical activity between white women and brown men.

Even American children’s books replicate this libidinal image of Hawai’i. In *A Trip to Hawai’i* (written to commemorate the 1959 admission of Hawai’i as ‘our’ fiftieth state), for example, the boy Jeff, arriving by boat from San Francisco, is given a lei. ‘At first, Jeff felt foolish. He protested, ‘I don’t want to wear flowers like a sissy.’ But soon he noticed boys and men wearing leis as well as girls and women’ (Greene, 1959, pp.8-9). Jeff overcomes his homophobia by realizing the truth of the wear-worn tourist adage - when in Rome, do as the Romans do – even if, to him, it means looking like a ‘sissy’. In an older children’s book, young Alice also remarks on the oddity of seeing people of both sexes adorned with flowers, but, unlike Jeff, she politely refrains from voicing gender-specific objections. Instead, ‘Alice thought this a very pretty custom’ (Krout, 1900, p.23). These two examples show how signs are interpreted from a Western point of view, which *appears* magnanimously to accept signs of otherness as ‘very pretty customs’. But below this chivalric mask, the underlying values are clearly those of the colonizing subject who remains in control of the narrative framework in which the signs of otherness are evaluated. As Edward Said succinctly points out, ‘the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them’ (1993, p.xiii).

This discussion suggests that the staged welcoming rituals at Aloha Tower Marketplace and their nostalgic references to the bygone era of Boat

Day glory express the touristic meta-narrative's assigned meanings, which have no objective properties, and which intend to validate the patriarchal Western tourist gaze on Hawai'i as the feminized other. Further, nostalgia functions as a terministic screen that perpetuates the hierarchical economic, social, and political relationships between outsiders and the local population established during the colonial period by enforcing a principle of continuity between Hawai'i's past and present that excludes counter-narratives and thus silences resistance to assimilation. Clichéd representation of Hawai'i as other is communicated through a variety of colorful texts and non-texts, of which the hula girl in coconut bra and grass skirt is emblematic and, narratively speaking, synecdochal for the hegemonic discourse that continues culturally to trivialize and economically exploit Hawai'i as the 'Land of Aloha'.

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