Media Translation in the Production of Legendary Hawai‘i

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Sadhana Naithani’s call for papers invites folklorists to move away from a model within which traditional folklore and modern media are considered in opposition to one another; rather, she suggests that the reciprocal influence of folkloric arts and popular media has been an “ongoing process in the ever-changing history of folklore.” Starting from an understanding of tradition that foregrounds history, Henry Glassie has reminded folklorists that the opposite of tradition “is not change but oppression” (396). Historical violence in other words is at the core of the rupture of tradition, a rupture that, at the hands of a new power, may take the form not only of unequivocal suppression, but often of translation, recontextualization, and recodification across cultures and media.

The history of Hawai‘i and its traditions is marked by such violent ruptures: the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy, the annexation of Hawai‘i as a Territory of the United States in 1898 against the will of the majority of Hawaiians, the subsequent suppression of Hawaiian language, and more (Silva 2004). Following the 1898 annexation of Hawai‘i to the USA, place-centered Hawaiian mo‘olelo (stories históries) or “legends”—like raw materials—served, within popular and scholarly venues, to imagine and market a new product, legendary Hawai‘i: a space constructed for non-Hawaiians (and especially Americans) to experience, via Hawaiian legends, a Hawai‘i that is exotic and primitive while beautiful and welcoming. This production of legendary Hawai‘i de-legitimized Hawaiian narratives and traditions and at the same time constructed them as representative of Hawaiian “culture.” Starting from an understanding of tradition that foregrounds the violent change that colonialism can make, my larger study (in progress) on Hawaiian “culture.” Starting from an understanding of tradition “is not change but oppression” (396). Historical violence in other words is at the core of the rupture of tradition, a rupture that, at the hands of a new power, may take the form not only of unequivocal suppression, but often of translation, recontextualization, and recodification across cultures and media.

Since most people encountered Hawai‘i through such tourist-oriented publications, it became crucial for them to include photographic illustrations, which thanks to half-tone technology was cheaper and easier by the 1890s. Paradise of the Pacific began to feature such black and white pictures in July 1894. Photographic illustrations, the technological innovation of the time, were clearly intended to enhance the appeal of the publication and even more so of Hawai‘i, which was in a 1937 Eastman Kodak advertisement identified as the “World’s Most Photogenic Land.” The December issues, in particular, were richly illustrated so as to contrast the lushness of the tropics with the wintry bareness of many American readers’ surroundings. Furthermore, as two different pieces in the May 1901 issue of Paradise of the Pacific stated, there was the “objective” advantage of photography over verbal narrative: “The camera has done more to present the beauties of Hawaii to the world than the most flowery

Imagine being quite wealthy, living in North America approximately 100 years ago, and thinking about going on vacation. You have mail-ordered a tourist brochure entitled Hawai‘i, and its first lines are: “Have you heard of Hawai‘i? Do you know of the group of islands lying under the tropic of Cancer, which are at once the most perfect in climate and the most picturesque in scenery of all the Pacific groups? As the newest Territory of the nation, the latest ‘star chaser’ in the Union, are you in touch with the country and the people? And if not, do you not think it worth while to know them?” The Hawaii Promotion Committee that issued these booklets was formed in 1903, meaning that organized tourism was new to the islands and coincided with the loss of Hawaiian sovereignty. The style, visual layout, and tone of these tourist brochures was similar to that of the magazine Paradise of the Pacific, explicitly aiming “to disseminate information concerning the advantages of the Hawaiian Islands as a place of rest and pleasure for tourists, health and change for convalescents, profit for those who have money to invest in new and growing industries.” By 1901 Paradise of the Pacific had a circulation of 5,000, with 500 subscribers in the Islands.

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effusions of the most imaginative story writers. While one invariably tells the truth—and the truth is what the public wants—the others practice deceptions on their readers that work harm to the Islands...” (14.5:8); and “A well executed picture tells more than a column of type, sometimes, and in this age of rapid metal reproduction of the photograph the counterfeit presentment of everyday scenes can be given in the morning or evening papers at a small cost. The half-tone is crowding much of the letterpress out of the page, and the public appreciates the change.... The order of new things is apt to be: story the illustration, not illustrate the story” (14.5:18). Photographic images were being marketed and read as “reliable” introductions to Hawai‘i.

In the wake of the 1888 publication of The Legends and Myths of Hawai‘i: The Fables and Folk-Lore of a Strange People by His Hawaiian Majesty King David Kalakaua, legends began to appear in Paradise of the Pacific in 1889, and by 1890 “Legendary Lore” had become a regular feature of the monthly publication; these legends were usually accompanied by photographic illustrations starting in 1894. Collections of Hawaiian legends in English published in the early twentieth century all featured an abundance of photographs: more than fifty in Emma Beckley Nakuina’s Hawaii: Its People, Their Legends (1904); sixteen in Thomas G. Thrum’s Hawaiian Folk Tales (1907) and William D. Westervelt’s Legends of Ghosts and Ghost-Gods (1915); twenty-one in Westervelt’s Legends of Old Honolulu (1915); eight in Westervelt’s Hawaiian Historical Legends (1923); and eighteen in Thrum’s More Hawaiian Folk Tales (1923). The notice in a 1904 issue of Paradise of the Pacific publicizing Emma Nakuina’s collection articulates the work that “legendary lore” in magazines, books, and tourist brochures was to do: “[Hawaii: Its People, Their Legends] takes up a novel line of tourist promotion endeavor, presenting in its 64 pages of pictures and narratives a good deal of Island folk lore that appeals to that class of tourists who always take an interest in the people of the strange places they visit. As the history of all unlettered nations is derived from their legends so are the deeds of the forefathers of the present Hawaiians brought to our knowledge by the old tales that have come down through the centuries of verbal recital.” Reading Hawaiian legends is meant to be for a class of tourists a good deal of Island folk lore that appeals to that class of tourists who always take an interest in the people of the strange places they visit. As the history of all unlettered nations is derived from their legends so are the deeds of the forefathers of the present Hawaiians brought to our knowledge by the old tales that have come down through the centuries of verbal recital.” Reading Hawaiian legends is meant to be for a class of tourists a really good way to be “in touch with the country and the people,” to get to “know them.”

How did legendary Hawai‘i serve the promotion of Hawai‘i as tourist destination at a time when Hawai‘i was a particularly fertile “contact zone” (Pratt 1992) for the American imaginary? I don’t think I need to explain further in this short piece how tourism shapes and mediates that knowing. But I do want to point out briefly how translation and photography, while contributing to that construction, de-legitimized Hawaiian narratives and traditions.

As Lawrence Venuti synthesizes, “[a]lthough the history of colonialism varies significantly according to place and period, it does reveal a consistent, no, an inevitable reliance on translation” (Scandals of Translation 165). When missionaries, administrators, educators, and anthropologists translated the texts of the colonized, these translated texts discursively strengthened colonial governments and constructed representations of the colonized subject that justified the “civilizing” project of the colonial power (see Naithani’s studies of British colonial translations of Indian folk and fairy tales). Because they are often perceived as faithful or innocent documentation paradoxically because they are translations, these texts go unquestioned in the western context and become the dominant representations of colonized peoples. I am using the present tense because the Hawaiian “legends” in translation available in the ABC stores of Waikiki today are the Thrum and Westervelt translations. Several consequences that are well known to folklorists follow: authoritative western translators become known as “experts” in non-western cultures—their customs or literatures—while Natives are recognized as “informants” only; texts selected for translation become canonical and determine the construction of non-western literary traditions and, by extension, comparative literature; the translated texts that form these “indigenous literary traditions” are often devoid of political content or strife; Hawaiians represented in the ethnographic present tense are forever in the words of Westervelt “not inventive... but imaginative.”

Furthermore, because western and non-western languages are not equal, what Gayatri Spivak calls “translation-as-violation” (A Critique of Postcolonial Reason 162) is operative in moving from the colonized or Native language to that of the colonizer. This violation is in stark contrast with the faithfulness vs. freedom debate that dominated early and Renaissance translation in Europe because on either side of the argument the authority or complexity of the original “classic” language and text was assumed. With translation from colonized languages, it is instead common for the target language—English in the cases I discuss—to dictate its cultural logic. The rewriting that all translation involves is thus driven in colonial translation by a discursive strategy of containment and brings about the re-writing of the other in the dominant language’s terms. This violation is “epistemic” in that the colonized or Native world is re-codified in terms of the colonizers’ (Spivak, Critique of Postcolonial Reason 161). Within the discipline of folkloristics, Lee Haring has critically documented such “reframing” into different generic shape (myth) of Malagasy narratives in early twentieth-century translations into French: “what the west calls myth has no genre attached to it” in this region, he writes, but western researchers took “the privilege of naming certain narratives as myth” (“Pieces for a Shabby Hut” 191 and 192). In folklore as in literature, this re-coding has significant genre implications, and that is why I have been referring to Hawaiian “legends” in quotation marks: the early-twentieth-century translation of mo‘olelo (history and story) as “legend,” “myth,” and “fable,” often
interchangeably, exemplified such a domesticating and dislocating interpretive strategy.

As a result of this epistemic violence, place was not in these English-language translations the narrative core that it was and is in Hawaiian narratives, and by the same token the relationship of Hawaiians with nature and land was also lost or misrepresented. In the photographs accompanying these translations, reductive tropes contribute to the representation of individuals as types and of places as generic landscapes. The most common iconic images of people were, not unexpectedly, young women wearing lei or garlands, hula performers, surfers, and individuals identified only by their work-related tasks, especially fishermen. This pervasive imagery showed how Hawaiians were irredeemably in a “legendary” past—untouched by progress and thus doomed in modern society—and encouraged viewers to think of Hawaiian storytelling and culture as primitive and unchanging. The most common landscape photos featured coconut trees often “with reflection,” waterfalls, valleys and peaks, hardened lava flows of the ‘a’a type: these icons are repeated over and over again both in the books of legends and on the pages of Paradise of the Pacific. These pictures projected Hawai‘i as an attractively mysterious space, an inviting and “misty” land with a generic story and look to which tourists could have easy and relatively safe access. The specificity that characterizes place-centered Hawaiian narratives was noticeably missing, unless as in the case of the Nu‘uanu Pali or cliff the place was to be publicized as a tourist attraction. The story told by this visual apparatus advertised Hawai‘i as a land filled with natural beauty and devoid of either dangerous or competitive Native others. Such natural beauty and softness have metonymically coalesced into the image that best represents Hawai‘i today as a tourist destination. As Native scholar and activist Haunani-Kay Trask wrote in her 1991/1992 groundbreaking essay “‘Lovely Hula Hands’: Corporate Tourism and the Prostitution of Hawaiian Culture,”1 “Mostly a state of mind, Hawai‘i is the image of escape from the rawness and violence of daily American life. Hawai‘i—the word, the vision, the sound in the mind—is the fragrance and feel of soft kindness. Above all, Hawai‘i is ‘she,’ the Western image of the Native ‘female’ in her magical allure. . . . Thus, Hawai‘i, like a lovely woman, is there for the taking” (136 and 144).

I am arguing that we can trace at least partially the making of this image to the post-annexation English-language photographically illustrated volumes of Hawaiian “legends.” Does my argument implicitly condemn the translation of folklore across media—into print or photography—as being nothing more than “invented” folklore? My brief presentation of a particular case of colonial promotion of Hawai‘i as violently disruptive of its traditions should not be generalized; the “reinvention” of folkloric arts is part of their dynamic tradition. Both historical and contemporary Hawaiian counter-narratives offer an invitation to unmake the imaginary or legendary Hawai‘i and to re-vision it as an indigenous “storied place” with a very different relationship to the land.

My analysis, for instance, does not apply equally to all early twentieth-century translators of Hawaiian “legends.” Westervelt is the one writing most explicitly for tourists, inviting a “touristic reading,” acting as a tour guide while retelling ancient tales. But Emma Nakuina’s book as the only photographically illustrated book about Hawai‘i by a Native Hawaiian in that period (Davis 289) is at the other end of the spectrum, standing out as an “autoethnography” in Mary Louise Pratt’s terms. Her use of the new media—tourist publications in the English language and photography—exemplified resistance, both as resilience of Native traditions and as their adaptability to change. Photographs in her book featured portraits of chiefly Hawaiians from the past and modern-day legislators or Victorian-clad ladies; and the places shown were invested with historical and cultural significance, the way monuments would be in a European guide. But Nakuina’s Hawai‘i: Its People, Their Legends was never reprinted: her Hawaiian perspective became unwanted or unnecessary as Thrum and especially Westervelt consolidated Hawai‘i as a tourist destination where the only Hawaiians “seen” were those of old, no Hawaiian storyteller could be heard, and hula became an eroticized image cut loose from the knowledge and stories it tells.
Recognizing an albeit marginalized agency of Hawaiians in the history of photography matters not only to document their resistance in the past but to provide a genealogy for Native Hawaiian artists in the present, like Anne Kapulani Landgraf who strongly represents and advocates a photographic vision that emerges from Hawaiian values and views. Landgraf’s vision in her two volumes of black-and-white photography and bilingual text—Nâ Wahi Pana O Ko’olau Poko. Legendary Places of Ko’olau Poko 1994 and Nâ Wahi Kapu o Maui 2003—foregrounds a Native visual and narrative perspective on place that entails a different epistemology, grapples with the history of land issues in Hawai‘i, and strengthens the value and creativity of Hawaiian narrative traditions today. Photography and bilingual poetic (hi)story in print are her chosen media for re-inscribing a Hawaiian connection with land, language, and traditions into contemporary consciousness.

Thus, attending to the ideological powers of myth or “traditional” narratives in today’s multi-media world means learning to recognize, in addition to the destructive uses we have put them, the constructive ones that narrative traditions have served and can serve. In Hawai‘i, contemporary artists like photographer Kapulani Anne Landgraf and poets Haunani-Kay Trask and Ku’ualoha Ho’omanawanui work with an understanding of cultural memory that is not nostalgic but creative and emerges from the re-appropriation of multiple, emplaced stories. Against the violent translation that Hawai‘i has been subjected to, contemporary Native storytellers like them—in whatever medium—narratively and visually re-create tradition in the present for the future.

Endnotes


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Courtesy: www.alternative-hawaii.com/anncecil/kids.htm