

**Royal Hawaiian Dance:
How Hotels Commodified the Hula**

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When most people first hear the word “hula,” they immediately think of the bobbing head hula dancer doll that resides on the dashboard of so many American cars. They think of plastic leaf skirts, coconut bras, ukuleles, and Mai Tais. How did a dance that began as a sophisticated and integrated form of religious worship and historical chronicle become so famous and so commodified? How did it become Hawaii’s tourist icon, a product to be bought and sold? What is it about dance that lends itself so easily to manipulation and commodification? For the answer to this question, I directed my studies toward twentieth-century discourses about tourism and anthropological studies on dance. In most texts on Hawaii and the hula, including the book *Staging Tourism* by the dance historian Jane Desmond,¹ the development of the hula into a cash commodity coincides with the early twentieth-century quest for “authentic experiences.” However, in this thesis, I will closely examine the hula performances of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in the 1920’s and 1950’s in order to demonstrate that the commodification of the hula was not caused by a quest for the authentic, but because of its placement on a hotel stage.

In examining the history of the hula I will explain that the dance has always been manipulated to train Hawaiians how to perform specific roles, but that it was in the hotels, during the 1950’s, that the hula underwent its most dramatic changes. I will illustrate that the hula has always been used by those in power to display control over the bodies of Hawaiians by tracing the dance’s progressive commodification. The thesis will prove that the hula was used to naturalize power relations in twentieth-century Hawaii by looking at how tourism and the tourists’ changing expectations of Hawaii as a “destination image” determined what hulas were danced, where they were danced, and who danced them.

¹ Jane Desmond, *Staging Tourism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1999), 2.

After examining the history of the hula, I will look into twentieth-century discourses on modern life, “primitivism,” anthropology, and tourism to convey how these ideas transformed the hula by changing the meaning behind travel. These discourses explain why people traveled in the twentieth-century, what they wanted to see, and what kind of contact they wanted to have with the “native culture.” Yet it is in examining how the hula changed from small solo performances to massive hula spectacles at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel between 1920 and the 1950’s that I will provide concrete examples of how tourism continued to use the hula to project the image of Hawaii that tourists wanted until the dance lost its value as anything but a profit making commodity. I hope to prove that it was not until the hotels of the 1950’s brought the practice of the hula inside, called it a “traditional dance,” placed it on a stage in front of dinner tables, and sold tickets for it that the dance became fully commodified. By looking at the history of the hula, twentieth-century discourses surrounding tourism, and the hula performances at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, I will show that it was not until hotels tried to place the hula in the realm of artistic dance that it lost its meaning.

The Royal Hawaiian Hotel in the 1920’s and 1950’s

On the February 1, 1927, the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, a fifteen-acre coral stucco palace on Waikiki beach opened its doors for the first time. The Matson Navigation Company, a shipping company that began bringing tourists to Honolulu in the late 1920’s, decided to build the Royal Hawaiian as a first-class resort for the most elite travelers. After investing four million dollars and two years in construction, Matson celebrated the opening with a grand gala. Only the finest champagne was served; only the most “authentic” looking Hawaiians were allowed to serve; and only the most elite of travelers

were invited to attend.² According to an unsigned article, “All the Glamour and Glory of Old Hawaii Remain,” published in the *Honolulu Star Bulletin*; these tourists had come for “the scenery of a second Eden, picturesque entertainments...[and] to find here that romance and glamour which still remain from the far-gone days of the kingdoms and tribal principalities.”³ The 1,200 guests consisted of wealthy members of the American government, high ranking military officials, important business owners, and upper-class American families. These tourists represented what the sociologist Dean MacCannell called “the new leisure class,” rich, well educated, and somewhat adventurous Americans looking to escape from a cold, mechanized, calculating urban society to a warm, tropical paradise.⁴

The most talked about event of the evening, however, was the Hawaiian pageant staged by Princess Abigail Kawananakoa, a member of the territory’s former royal family. This pageant was a grand reenactment of King Kamahameha’s landing on the beaches of Waikiki one hundred years earlier. This display of “Hawaii’s past” consisted of three main sections. The first, was a grand orchestra concert under the stars. The second was a water exhibition, a recreation of King Kamahameha’s ship landing, with fifteen single and double Hawaiian outrigger canoes rowed in front of the hotel, the shirtless tan men “lighting the night sky with orange lights and singing ‘ancient chants.’”⁵ Finally, the evening ended with five beautiful brown skinned “Hawaiian” women performing their solo hula dances on a large oceanside dance floor. Each dancer represented one of Hawaii’s five major islands, and danced the hula most closely identified with that island.

² Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, 90.

³ “All the Glamour and Glory of Old Hawaii Remains” *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, 31. Jan. 1927, I 8.

⁴ Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: Theory of a New Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999),1.

⁵ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, 92.

Accompanied by the Royal Hawaiian Band, the women would soon be known as the Royal Hawaiian Girls Glee Club. For Americans, the Girls Glee Club represented the most respectable hula dancers, and their performances of ancient or kahiko hulas became the most sought after performances in Hawaii.

Exactly twenty years later, on February 1, 1947, the *Matsonia*, an “all first class ship” of the Matson Navigation Company arrived in Honolulu with 550 passengers for the reopening of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. The hotel had been leased for the previous five years to the U.S. Navy as a “rest and relaxation center for those serving in the Pacific fleet.”⁶ Over two million dollars were spent to renovate the hotel into a six-story 400 room palace. The reopening of the hotel to the first 550 peacetime vacationers was hailed by the *New York Times* as “solid proof that the islands were once again in the tourist business.”⁷ At the reopening celebration that night the Matson Navigation Company declared that they would resume their four-in-a-half day cruises from Los Angeles and San Francisco every ten days, while Pan American World Airways and United Airlines announced the inauguration of twice-daily flights from the West Coast at affordable prices on the first of April.⁸ These new visitors were dramatically different from the travelers of the 1920’s. Middle rather than upper-class, they came to Hawaii not to escape from the masses, but as part of a new mass tourism.

In the 1950’s travel and tourism transformed not only who traveled, but also why they were traveling. The Royal Hawaiian Hotel began to shift its language in advertisements from being an “exotic” place of new experiences for an elite, to being an

⁶ [The Royal Hawaiian Hotel Webpage](http://www.royalhawaiian.com), 11 October 2005, <http://www.royalhawaiian.com>

⁷ Robert MacMillan “A Welcome to Hawaii: Vacationers Return to the Crowded Islands,” *New York Times*, 31 Feb.1947, X17.

⁸ MacMillan, “A Welcome to Hawaii”,X17.

“affordable” and “restful” location for the modern American family.⁹ As travel grew more affordable, middle-class tourists entered the tourism market. These new tourists were not seeking an “authentic” escape from modernity and were not interested in leisure as an opportunity for self-cultivation by observing different cultures. Men were just returning home from war, getting married, and starting families. Some were looking for an affordable location to have a honeymoon. The Royal Hawaiian Hotel responded to these calls by advertising Hawaii as the perfect lovers’ getaway, a “tropical isle of romance...so easy to reach at a cost amazingly low.”¹⁰ However, after World War II, people were looking for places to take their families; they wanted travel to be easy, safe, and calming. This is when leisure changed its meaning, and tourists began looking for relaxing instead of exotic vacations.

However, the most dramatic change at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel was the transformation of its entertainment. At the gala opening, most of the guests expected to end the evening outside on the beach watching the famous Royal Hawaiian Glee Club dancers, as in the 1920’s. However, much to their surprise; they were led into an enormous ballroom to watch the very first indoor hula spectacle. The hula shows of the 1920’s always began with a small group of three or four dancers performing in a unison line and ended with a series of solos.¹¹ However, in 1947 the small troupe of solo dancers suddenly multiplied into a cast of more than thirty beautiful young “native” Hawaiian girls performing “commercial hulas” on an enormous stage with expensive lighting and ti-leaf skirts.¹² The dancers were no longer soloists, trained by professionals

⁹ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*,134.

¹⁰Quoted in Desmond. *Staging Tourism*, 133.

¹¹ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*,107.

¹² MacMillan, “A Welcome to Hawaii”,X17.

and famous for their individual styles and interpretation. Instead they were chorus girls trained to dance exactly alike, and dancing only the hulas deemed entertaining by the hotel management. Even the dancers' looks had changed: as they had to be tall (5'6"), pencil thin, with a strong hapa-haole, or half Caucasian look.¹³ By the 1950's, the hula was no longer a small part of a larger spectacle. Starting with the very first indoor performance at the Royal, the hula became the spectacle.

The similarities and differences between the hulas of the 1920's and the 1950's reveal a lot about tourism and its ability to change culture. In this thesis, I will show that the "authentic" hula solos of the 1920's and the grand spectacles of the 1950's were both transformed by tourism, as it determined who danced the hula, where it was performed and what hulas were danced. Both versions of the Royal Hawaiian hula provided a style of the hula that tourists of the day wanted. As a result, they both stripped the hula of its original meaning, context, movements, and location. They both became important ways of presenting Hawaii as "a place where Hawaiians live and do Hawaiian things like the hula" in order to authenticate the tourist experience of Hawaii.¹⁴ They both used the body to display differences, to naturalize these differences, and to make the boundaries between cultures stronger. Finally they both changed the hula to provide a better "destination image" or set of "visuals and ideas associated in the tourist's mind with a particular locale" that acted both as a "lure for potential customers and as a framework for perception and evaluation of the tourist's experience once she or he is on site."¹⁵ Ultimately, they showed how tourism exerted power over Hawaiian culture.

¹³ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, 134.

¹⁴ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

Nevertheless, it was not until the 1950's that the hula actually became a commodity. To be sure, the solo hula performances of the 1920's, like the group spectacles of the 1950's, reflected the power tourism exerted over Hawaiian culture. However, it was not until the postwar tourist hotels moved the hula indoors, placed it on a stage, physically isolated it from audiences, and sold it as its own performance (without any other attractions on the bill) that the dance really became a product that tourists could buy. However, before I examine in depth how the 1950's changed the hula, I must explain how a traditional dance became so vulnerable to manipulation, and to do this I begin by looking at the history of the hula.

History of the Hula

The chief reason that the hula is so easily manipulated is that there is no such thing as a single hula dance. Rather, hula is a term used to refer to a number of dances “uniquely done for or by Hawaiians with themes, contents and purposes wrapped up in values that have historically been important to people calling themselves Hawaiian.”¹⁶ There are as many histories of the hula as there are styles, but the main theory of the hula is that it served originally both as a religious practice and as a physical embodiment of chant. In its religious context the hula was only performed at ceremonies to honor the gods (ha'a) at preparations for war to gain the support of the gods, and at age-set ritual and rites of passage (hula).¹⁷ Kahunas or temple priests taught these religious hulas, which were only danced in conjunction with worship. Performed only by men who had survived a rigorous selection process, the “ha'a dances were masculine, virile, and

¹⁶ Ishmael Stagner, *Hula!* (Hawaii: The Institute for Polynesian Studies Press, 1985), 3.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Buck, *Paradise Remade* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 109.

physical” and devoted to specific deities.¹⁸ They served as preparation rituals for war and helped train men for the physical demands of battle, as well as teaching them their role in the social hierarchy of their communities. Where a man danced in the hula line and what steps he was allowed to do symbolized to him and to the rest of the community his place in the olohe or warrior society.¹⁹

The second function of the hula was to embody or physically enact poetry, chant, and communal history. Hula was a form of accompaniment to chant and poetry as “dance without poetry did not exist.”²⁰ However, chant in this case meant more than just a vocalization of poetry, for in “pre-contact” Hawaii, that is, Hawaiian society before contact with Europe and the Western world it served as the main text of history. Chants were memorized and sung at specific occasions to instruct those who were present in the history of the ritual, how the ritual had been done in the past, why the ritual was important, and even what function the ritual served in current society.²¹ The hula, however, was more than just a physical interpretation of these chants. Pre-contact Hawaii was based on oral traditions and not writing, so the deeper meanings and connotations behind the words of the chants could not be contained in a body of written works; instead it was contained in the actual bodily movements of dancers. The movements of the hands, the rhythms of the hips, and the steps of the feet were “choreographed to illustrate selected words of Hawaiian text”²² and to expand on their meaning with codified, meaningful gestures. However, depending on a dancer’s status in a community and

¹⁸ Stagner, *Hula!*, 2.

¹⁹ Stagner, *Hula!*, 12.

²⁰ Buck, *Paradise Remade*, 109.

²¹ *Ibid*, 112.

²² Adrienne L. Kaeppler, “Acculturation in Hawaiian Dance,” *Yearbook of International Folk Music Council* 4 (1972):38.

knowledge of the histories contained in the chant, a dancer was allowed to explore his creativity in individual stylistic interpretations. This theory also insists that what parts a dancer was allowed to play, and how much freedom he had in his movement embodied his social and political place in the community. The hula also served as a crucial element of collective communication and memory. They were the footnotes to Hawaii's main text.

In both its religious and social functions, the hula played an integral role in Hawaiian society. The hula connected its dancers to traditions and religious concepts of the past. The hula offered dancers a symbolic representation of the rights and responsibilities owed by the individuals to the community and to their gods. Finally, it offered dancers a spatial demonstration of where they belonged in society and how closely they were connected to the gods by where they stood in the hula line and how much freedom they were allowed in their choice of movement. All of these purposes, however, would change radically with the arrival of the missionaries.

By 1820, when Christian missionaries arrived in Hawaii, the hula was so interwoven into the Hawaiian way of life, that it was impossible to ban the dance completely. However, the missionaries were able to "civilize" the dance by stripping the hula of its religious, political, and social meanings. The first shift occurred when the American missionaries banned Hawaiians from practicing their "barbaric" religion. The hula was thus severed of its connection to the gods; it was no longer useful as worship, and the kahunas or temple priests were no longer allowed to teach it.²³ In order to implant English as both a spoken and a written language, the missionaries also banned the use of native Hawaiian languages.²⁴ Chant lost all meaning as the missionaries imposed English

²³ Stagner, *Hula!*, 12.

²⁴ Buck, *Paradise Remade*, 122.

as the dominant language and emphasized literacy over orality. The missionaries taught the Hawaiians to speak, read, and write English in order to teach them the Bible; however, as a result; they caused Hawaiians to lose connection with their own language and traditional chant.²⁵ The poetry was only beautiful in its original language; the history was only important if it was recited and left unwritten, and the dance was only important if it complemented and expounded the poetry and history. The missionaries “undercut the traditional religious-political significance of hula, but did not detract from its aesthetic, cultural, and entertainment values.”²⁶ In reality what the missionaries did was turn the hula into a secular dance. Cut from its moorings in traditional Hawaiian culture, the hula was free to be manipulated into whatever form the missionaries wanted.

In this case, the missionaries used the hula to interpret for Hawaiians their new place in society. By taking away the old religious, social, and political roles of the hula, they erased the old religious, social and political roles of Hawaiian society at large. As the missionaries began to “civilize” the country and its people to behave like Americans, they used the hula as a powerful tool for teaching Western manners and customs. The first change they made was in “civilizing” male/female relations. For the missionaries, Hawaiian men and women had to learn how to interact with one another in a “civilized” way. In my opinion, the missionaries, in an effort to “Christianize” relations between women and men, introduced women into the hula. The hula was placed in new spatial configurations, such as two parallel lines, that called for men and women to perform steps facing each other without touching.²⁷ Introducing women into the hula was also intended to keep men from remembering their old places in the line and their duty to the old gods

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid,155.

²⁷ Stagner, *Hula!*,12.

and community, from meeting on their own, and feeling any sense of group consciousness. Whatever the reason, the hula was transformed from a men's dance into a dance for both sexes.

By 1832, when the monarchy of the Kamehameha family was instituted and a royal class of Hawaiians established, the hula had become a symbol of the changes in the social structure of Hawaii. The hula was now completely infused with European dance steps, spatial configurations (such as the interweaving parallel lines common in European social dances), Western musical rhythms, and even costuming. The use of Western dress such as shoes and floor-length muumuus was enforced to conceal the dancers' bodies, and thus minimize the dance's sexuality. However, this change in dress inhibited the mobility of the legs, prompting the development of new steps, such as the ku'i or side kick. Finally, with the reign of the Kalakaua family in the early twentieth century, the hula became an esteemed art form. With the hula now a source of Hawaiian pride, changes to the dance turned into public affairs.²⁸ The dance was sanctioned as a legitimate symbol and expression of Hawaiian identity. Heinrich Berger, a famous composer and conductor, was hired from Germany to develop the dance's rhythms and broaden its vocabulary of steps. Queen Liliuokalani even encouraged the spread of public hula clubs or halaus. Finally, the first royal attempt was made to chronicle the history of Hawaiians through a systematic study of the oral traditions of the hula, a history that had been lost with the abolition of chant.²⁹

²⁸ Stagner, *Hula!*, 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

In the early 1900's, the hula occupied a revered place in the lives of Hawaiians. The dance represented both a connection to past traditions and a means of securing them in the Western cultural firmament. The Americanization of the Hawaiian way of life led the islanders to believe that they were going to develop their own government. Many hoped that one day Hawaii would be an autonomous nation. The hula itself became an autonomous practice of "high culture" or "high art." However, as twentieth-century advances in travel began to allow for reasonably short trips from the mainland of the United States, the increased contact between American travelers and Hawaiian residents produced a completely different effect. Each had preconceived notions of what the "other" was like, and as the two came to terms with the reality of the "other," conflict inevitably arose. With the beginning of the twentieth century a new tourist class came into being that would change the face of Hawaii and the steps of the hula. These visitors not only had the money and the ability to travel to out-of-reach locations, they also had the desire to travel. New anthropological discourses on culture educated the new tourist class in new ways of observing the world, radically changing how people traveled. As a consequence, the image Hawaii presented of itself had to change. In order to understand how tourism changed the hula, I am going to explore the discourses on tourism and the formation of a new leisure class, modernity, primitivism, social science, and a new concept of culture, ending with a discussion of the feminine and the "noble savage."

New Discourses on Travel

The industry of tourism began in the early twentieth century in response to technological advances in travel as well as the formation of a new class of modern elite tourists with the money, time, and desire to travel. Dean MacCannell, a cultural critic and

the author of *The Tourist*, describes these elite tourists as “the new leisure class.”³⁰ Members of this leisured group had the money and time to visit places like Hawaii because of the enormous concentration of wealth produced by industrial capitalism, and because they no longer had to work. They had access to distant locales because for years imperialism and colonialism had “civilized,” “westernized,” and claimed ownership of them. In the case of Hawaii the United States had already annexed the islands both politically and through American ownership of most of the sugar and pineapple plantations. Finally, this elite leisure class traveled because travel had become an integral part of their identity. Defined by its consumption of materials, wealth, and experiences, it used traveling to many different, “exotic” places as a status marker. The more one traveled, the higher one’s social status became. However, the main impetus behind leisure class tourism was the new intellectual discourses that surrounded travel. Discourses on modernity, primitivism, and the “Other,” new studies in the social sciences, and new ideas about alternatives to modern life had penetrated upper-class thinking during the early twentieth century. However, these discourses did more than simply motivate these leisure tourists. The discourses helped to define what a tourist experience should be and, in defining this, changed travel entirely.

The first discourse that inspired travel among the leisure class surrounded modernity and modern life. Nineteenth-century writers and thinkers such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Charles Baudelaire had examined and criticized life in the modern city, in industrial society, and in a capitalist economy. The main problem with modern society for each of these writers was the loss of “authentic” experiences. In the new industrial age, people longed for life beyond factory smokestacks, social interactions

³⁰ MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 1.

unsullied by money, experiences and emotions free of institutional impositions. Modern urban life had dulled people's ability to be shocked or to interact with one another.

People had to protect themselves from over-stimulation from the city's numerous sights and sounds. As a result, people inculcated what Friedrich Engels in his classic study, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, called "brutal indifference,":

Londoners have had to sacrifice what is best in human nature in order to create all the wonders of civilization with which their city teems, that a hundred creative faculties lay dormant in them remained inactive and were suppressed....Hundreds of thousands of people of all classes and ranks of society jostle past one another, are they not all human beings with the same characteristics and potentialities, equally interested in the pursuit of happiness?....and yet they rush past one another as if they had nothing in common or were in no way associated with one another....The greater the number of people that are packed into a tiny space, the more repulsive and offensive becomes the brutal indifference, the unfeeling concentration of each person on his private affairs.³¹

This paragraph is packed with meaningful observations about life in the modern city, as well as many suggestions of how to escape the corruption and "unfeeling" individualism and isolation of modern life. Engels criticizes modern man and woman's suppression of

³¹ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, quoted in Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 166.

their “creative faculties” and hints at the need for people to find new, authentic, spiritual, or artistic ways of living in society. He criticizes the crowding and insinuates that man, by surrounding himself with a great number of people, is only isolated more. Finally, and most importantly, Engels criticizes the tendency for people to “rush” past one another without looking at each other.

All of Engels’ ideas of how to counter the “brutal indifference” of modern urban life were answered in twentieth-century discourses on the “primitive” and travel. “Primitivism” is defined by art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau as a “white, western predominantly male quest for an elusive object whose very condition of desirability resides in some form of distance and difference, whether temporal or geographical.”³² Primitivism placed a strict line between “civilized, western, modern” society and those societies that were not, the “other.” “Primitive” peoples and cultures became objects of obsession and fascination during the early twentieth century, societies free of the inauthentic, calculating, rushed, mechanized elements of modern Western life. The answer to “brutal indifference” could be found in these “other” cultures. Artists, intellectuals, anthropologists, and the educated elite believed that by recognizing the problems of modern society they could fix them. According to Solomon-Godeau, they had a “privileged access, be it spiritual, intellectual or psychological to that which is primordially internal,” but in order to access this, they had to “leave home to discover [their] real self.”³³ Leaving home was the key; it was due to this obsession with discovering new places and new people, untouched by capitalism and industrialism, that tourists left the U.S. and sailed to Hawaii. This discourse, however, also mystifies the

³² Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Gone Native: Primitivism in Art,” in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 314.

³³ Ibid.

“primitive” encounter, as it seems to promise self-discovery through contact with the Other. MacCannell saw tourism as “the modern equivalent of the religious pilgrimage” as both were “quests for authentic experiences” and “ultimate reality.”³⁴ These elite tourists were looking for reality, and so tourist bureaus, like Hawaii’s, began to advertise themselves as locations where people could return to a simpler, unhurried life, with room for creativity, and time to cultivate genuine social relationships. They sold themselves as places where people looked at one another, suggesting that contact with the Other would relieve the burden of brutal indifference and serve as a guide to authentic reality.

This concept of the Other referred to more than just a foreign nationality, but also implied a different race and gender. Although tourists wanted to be shocked by an encounter with the “un-civilized” and the “primitive” to have an authentic experience, most felt safer experiencing primitivism associated with the peaceful aspects of Hawaiian life. From this arose the concept that Jane Desmond calls “soft primitivism” or a fascination with the “ideal native,”³⁵ indigenous people who welcomed the tourist encounter and presented exotic bodies, behavior, and customs that were not too much of a shock for the westerner. “From the beginning the ideal native was ‘raced’ and ‘gendered’ in particular ways: female, not male, and ‘brown’ not ‘black.’”³⁶ Both the body of a “primitive male” and the “black body” were dangerous. They represented an “Other” that was too radical, and they both threatened the masculinity of the leisure class. Black labor made possible the leisured classes’ free time; black poverty created their wealth. To avoid this encounter, most tourists wanted contact with the “brown,” “native,” “island” “woman.” The American tourist viewed the brown woman as having a peaceful

³⁴ MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 2.

³⁵ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

connection to the earth, being an ideal mother figure because of the closeness of “primitive” kinship systems, and offering an example of the freedom “primitive” people had to embrace their bodies and their sexuality. The brown woman was safe and caring, yet she was also “erotic” and arousing. She was shocking, and she could look at you, but she would never cause you harm or remind you of the power you exerted over her.

Finally, the new thinking about modern society and the obsession with the “primitive” called for a scientific study of “outside society” or “primitive” “culture.” Anthropology was founded to make the same objective analysis of the “outside world” that Marx and Engels had brought to modern society. Anthropologists wanted to examine how “primitive cultures” really functioned, what roles men and women really played, and in their own way judge the effectiveness of such cultures against modern western society. Social scientists became fascinated with what cultural activities and artifacts meant to each culture as a way of bringing new theories and modes of analysis to bear on western society. Yet, because these early anthropologists were “scientists,” they attempted to study humans with the same methods that biologists or zoologists studied animals. They classified and categorized people according to differences that they could see. Cultural difference became “represented by and understandable through direct observation of ‘specimens.’ It is coupled with a conceptual system which maps species, peoples, and races in to typologies based on bodily difference, types of hair, arms, or flippers.”³⁷ Categorizing people became based on how they looked. Difference became embodied, and as a result people’s bodies became proof of difference.

This new assumption that seeing the body of the Other, the “primitive” female body, was an experience of that Other’s culture, coupled with the elite tourist class’

³⁷ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, xiv.

desire to escape modernity and its “brutal indifference,” is what transformed the hula into a tourist attraction. These new ideas had an enormous effect on what the “leisure class tourist” wanted from the tourist experience, and where most conflicts arose once large numbers of tourists arrived in Hawaii. To the leisured class of tourists Hawaii represented a “primitive” world untouched by “corruption,” a paradise where one could re-connect with nature, the environment, and “true” human nature. However, the romantic “island life” advertised by tourist bureaus did not actually exist. The elite tourists were looking for island natives who could teach them how “authentic” people relate to each other and to their surroundings. They wanted to “see” life before modernity, to be stirred by the sensual qualities of a civilization whose sexual practices and acceptance of the body were freer than on the U.S. mainland, and to be aroused by the body of the “island hula girl.” However, after decades of the American missionary presence in Hawaii, “the Native Hawaiian Population...was too ‘modern’ to sustain the dichotomy. They were highly literate, often part-Caucasian, and overwhelmingly Christian.”³⁸ Hawaii was no longer the romantic and “primitive” island of myth; it was a flourishing civilization of educated, modern individuals. However, in order to sell the island to tourists a “decontemporizing became, for Euro-Americans, a necessary way of ‘nativizing’ the Native Hawaiian population.”³⁹ Hawaii would have to return to an earlier state in order to be more attractive to tourists; however, it would keep its modern roads, English language, and welcoming “aloha” attitude toward American tourists. Hawaii would become a paradise of the past with all the modern conveniences of the present.

³⁸ Ibid,40.

³⁹ Ibid.

In order for Hawaii to attract elite leisure tourists, the Hawaiian Tourism Bureau and high-class hotels like the Royal Hawaiian had to provide attractions that were “timeless,” “primitive,” and “authentically Hawaiian.” The most readily accessible tool in displaying the qualities of Hawaii that tourists demanded was the hula, because it displayed “cultural difference” on the bodies of its women and hence offered tourists the ability to gaze at the body of the Other. The body thus became the “repository of truth.”⁴⁰ All humans are born with a body and so it is seen as the most “natural” of signs. It is the most conspicuous indication of identity as it projects signs of gender, race, and nationality. However, this natural body can also be used to “naturalize” differences between people.⁴¹ It can make the encounter with the body of the Other and the recognition of difference seem unquestionable, and it can widen the divide between two cultures. However, violent scars on the body can also expose and call into question the physical oppression being held over the actual body:

The colonial encounter is first an encounter with the body of the ‘Other.’ How that alien body is to be perceived, known, mastered or possessed is played out within a dynamic of knowledge/power relations....On one level, what is enacted is a violent history of colonial possessions and cultural dispossessions-real power over real bodies. On another level, this encounter will be endlessly elaborated

⁴⁰ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, xiv.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

with in a shadow world of representation-imaginary power
over imaginary bodies.⁴²

Although tourism was not a colonial encounter, the meeting between “Hawaiians” and “Tourists” involved American power over the actual bodies of Hawaiians, by controlling how they were to behave, and in terms of representation, how they were to look. Both of these relationships are seen together in the use of the hula as a tourist site. The hula revealed the power that tourists held over both the real bodies of the dancers and the representations of them. Tourists could exert control over the dances these women would perform and the image of “the hula girl” that was most convincing.

The Royal Hawaiian Hotel’s hula performances in both the 1920’s and 1950’s displayed the bodies of “Hawaiian” girls acting Hawaiian (dancing the hula) in order to make the idea of the Other accessible to tourists and to better sell Hawaii’s “destination image.” The hula at the turn of the century had begun to develop as an autonomous art form, but with the new demands of tourism, the meaning of the hula once again shifted as it was infused with “heritage.” Both versions had “Hawaiian” women come out in front of audiences and dance. This allowed audiences to look at “the hula girl” and observe the differences between her body and their own. As tourists they could examine her skin, hair, and eye color in order to differentiate her race and nationality; as audience members they could examine the way she moved her body and note how different her movements were from theirs. However, what the hula was doing was naturalizing these differences through the language of the body. The way a dancer moves is not inherent. A dancer is not born knowing how to dance; he or she has to train. This was especially true of the hula dancers of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel; because tourists wanted the hula to return to

⁴² Soloman-Godeau, “Gone Native: Primitivism and Art”, 320.

its “ancient” style, dancers had to retrain their bodies to perform steps no longer in their repertory or even in their ancestry. Upon closer examination, the dancers would have walked, eaten, drunk, and moved exactly like a Western tourist; however, in order to display the unique and “primitive” essence of Hawaii, hotels offered tourists the proof of bodily difference in the way Hawaiians danced.

The Commodification of the Hula

In looking at the similarities between the Royal Hawaiian hula performances of the 1920’s and 1950’s it becomes clear how tourism and twentieth-century travel discourses changed the hula into a tourist attraction; however, it is in looking at differences in where the dance was performed, how it was performed, who performed it, and why it was performed that proves that it was not until the 1950’s that the dance actually became solely a tourist commodity. A commodity is a product of uniform quality that can be produced in large quantities and whose market value arises from the owner's right to sell rather than use it. In Marxian theory the value of a commodity is the amount of human labor put into it.⁴³ A commodity also has a use-value and an exchange value for a price. The use-value consists of the “intrinsic” qualities that can be used by a society, and the exchange value implies that it can be traded to give its owner the profits of others’ labor through money.⁴⁴ The hula became commodified when it ceased to be a shared cultural practice, and became a paid performance.

The Royal Hawaiian Hotel’s hula performance of the 1920’s began the process of turning the hula into a commodity by regulating what hulas could be performed and who could perform them. In the 1920’s the hula was performed in very small groups or as

⁴³ MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 21.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

solos. However, to provide an “authentic” experience of the hula for tourists, dancers were required to perform the “ancient” or kahiko hulas. Only the “forms more closely allied with pre-contact times, such as the hula pahu, performed to chants in the Hawaiian language and accompanied not by the ukeleles but by the sonorous tones of the large pahu drum, were performed at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel.”⁴⁵ These dances were presented as the “traditional” versions of the hula; however, because the language and meaning of the “ancient” hulas had long been lost, their authenticity was staged. In the 1920’s not only were the steps prepared and manipulated to abet tourist consumption of an “authentic” image of Hawaii, but so were the bodies of the dancers. Who could dance the hula at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel was also informed by tourist ideas of a “Hawaiian” look, with limitations placed on the sex and physical appearance of the dancers in a way that made the hula dancer’s appearance function like a commodity. Only those who had the hapa-haole (half-Caucasian) brown skin, black hair, and dark eyes were allowed to perform, regardless of whether or not they were of Hawaiian ancestry. In the 1920’s and the 1950’s “ the actual genealogical backgrounds of the dancers mattered less than how they looked....Those with darker skin or more explicitly Polynesian looks found it hard to get cast, as did some dancers who looked too hapa-haole.”⁴⁶ What was important was that the dancers represented the tan coloring of Hawaii. They became authenticated by “appearing to be Hawaiian...through the racialized lens of the white mainlander’s perception.”⁴⁷ The dancers’ bodies had to project an image of Hawaii, and so the body of hula dancers became objectified. However, in the 1920’s the hula was still performed in

⁴⁵ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, 293.

⁴⁶ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, 134.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 24.

small groups or solos, so the dancers were allowed to have their own individual look as long as they fit into the category of “authentic.”

Although the Royal Hawaiian Hotel’s hula performances of the 1920’s did produce an image of “Hawaii” and “Hawaiians” for tourist consumption, the dance was not yet sold on its own. During the 1920’s, hula performances had not yet been “packaged” as separate events. Instead, the hula was always part of evening entertainments such as orchestra concerts and ukulele bands, and the hotel never charged for these performances.⁴⁸ Although the dance did entice tourists to visit Hawaii and stay at the Royal Hawaiian, on its own the hula had no monetary exchange value. Although the hotels had power over dancers as their employers, the dance itself stood outside the marketplace. The Royal Hawaiian Hotel could use the hula and buy the dancers, but in the 1920’s it wasn’t selling the hula itself. In addition, the 1920’s hula performances only consisted of a few solo dancers, who were not uniform and did not produce the same product every time they danced. Although dancers were instructed to perform “ancient” or “kahiko” hulas outdoors for an audience of the hotel’s choosing, the dancers were still allowed a degree of freedom in their interpretations of the dances and creativity in displaying their artistry.⁴⁹ This emphasis on individual technique and interpretation made it impossible for the hula to be mass produced like a commodity.

In the Royal Hawaiian’s grand hula spectacles of the 1950’s the hula finally became a product, a dance performed for profit. With the reopening of the hotel in 1947 the hula was moved indoors and to a stage. By delimiting the space of the dance, the hotel framed the experience, and began to charge people specifically for the hula

⁴⁸ Ibid,107.

⁴⁹ Ibid,106.

spectacle. Articles appeared about the amazing yet affordable hula spectacles, and in 1951 the Matson Navigation Company, the same company that owned the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, began to offer an annual “Aloha Week”, designed to introduce mainland American families to a new Royal Hawaiian hula show.⁵⁰ As the advertising and marketing of the hula began to treat the dance as a commodity, the dance itself began to function as one. Only the most entertaining and visually stimulating hulas were performed at the hotels -- westernized versions of the *mele ho’oipoipo* or storytelling hulas and the Tahitian fire dances. However, in the 1950’s the *mele ho’oipoipo* hulas were far from authentic. Instead they became an “airport variety...which is usually sung in English and expresses such concepts as going to a hukilau (fishing village), a little grass shack, or lovely hula hands.”⁵¹ This hula was not meant to inform a community of current events anymore. In the 1950’s it was performed by a large number of dancers for its pantomime and entertainment value. The Tahitian fire dances were also performed regularly as they added an element of danger, spectacle, and “rapid fire hip oscillations” of shirtless men to the performance.⁵² The steps of these dances were codified and their styles mass produced. Hula dancers were no longer soloists, but a “Hawaiian” version of the Radio City Music Hall’s Rockettes. Hand gestures were no longer left to the individual; hips had to sway in perfect unison, and the bodies had to look exactly the same.⁵³ As the spectacle began to require lights, identifiable costumes, accompaniment by bands, and dance floors, a great deal of time, money, and hard labor began to be poured into the hula. In the 1950’s the hula show entailed a huge amount of effort, and

⁵⁰“Upcoming Aloha Week Beckons Tourists,” *The Washington Post*, 14 October 1951,S15.

⁵¹ Kaepler, “Acculturation in Dance”, 94.

⁵² Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, 133.

⁵³ Stagner, *Hula!*, 17.

the more spectacular the show, the more the hotel would charge, just like a commodity. After hotels began to charge for these “entertainments,” hula performances became one of the most profitable attractions of Hawaii. In the 1950’s the hula’s use value became solely its exchange value.

More than the Royal Hawaiian Hotel’s ability to charge money for the performances, it was the change in tourism from the 1920’s to 1950’s that transformed the hula into a commodity. The elite tourists of the 1920’s were not looking to buy; they were seeking to experience. Tourists wanted Hawaii to be a “pre-capitalist utopia in which only use value, never exchange value prevails.”⁵⁴ They were intent on escaping the realm of commodities, on experiencing things that could never be reproduced. Although their desire for authenticity did force hula dancers to perform only “authentic” hulās, audiences still wanted to see individual dancers adding their own creative identities and interpretations to the dances. These elite tourists wanted to travel to Hawaii to experience the hula, not to buy a ticket, sit in a dark theater, and watch a show with artificial lights and costumes. These tourists wanted to participate actively in their experience of the hula. They read about it, traveled to it, and most importantly they wanted to have contact with it.

What kept the 1920’s hula from becoming solely a commodity was the fact that the audience retained a connection with the performance. Closing the spatial gap between performer and viewer, it recognized the dancers as human. In the 1920’s, the Royal Hawaiian dancers performed outdoors, and after the performances the audience could mingle with them.⁵⁵ The importance of this intimacy lies not only in the

⁵⁴Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 8.

⁵⁵ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, 107.

tourist/audience's ability to see the dancers, but also in the dancers' ability to see the audience. The dance was alive, its labor apparent, and its human actor enjoyed a direct relationship with the audience. Tourists of the 1920's desired to break away from atomistic urban life. They wanted to see and be seen. They wanted the human interactions of "authentic" experience. "Looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object or our gaze. Where this expectation is met...there is an experience to the fullest extent To perceive an aura of an object," it must have the "ability to look at us in return".⁵⁶ Close hula performances provided an experience that elite tourists felt they could no longer find at home. Keeping the dancers in front of them and keeping open the possibility of being seen or even touched by the dancers, was an essential part of the appeal of hula performances. It provided a thrill or it shocked. Tourists hoped to be seen by the "authentic" "primitive," because they were both excited and frightened of what that contact would mean. There was a chance that the "hula girl" might dance for them, look at them, or, God forbid, touch them, and that through this interaction some of the "mystical," "exotic," and "real" qualities of the "native" would be transmitted to the tourist, reinvigorating his life with creativity. The famous anthropologist Michael Taussig refers to this experience as "being hit between the eyes, being touched again."⁵⁷ In the 1920's, tourists did not want to consume the hula like a commodity. They wanted to experience the hula actively, not buy it.

Interactions between the tourist and the hula performer completely changed in the 1950's, as the hula was moved on stage, thus emphasizing the division between the hula

⁵⁶ Walter Benjamin. "On Some Motifs of Baudelaire", *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 188.

⁵⁷ Michael Taussig , "Physiognomic Aspects of Visual Worlds" *Visual Anthropology Review*. 8(1992), 20.

dancers as performers and the tourists as audience members. In the theater, tourists were no longer reminded that they were in Hawaii. They were now paying customers who demanded the product or show they had paid for. They had “purchased the right to look,” and like the tourists of the 1920’s, they gazed at the bodies of these women.⁵⁸ Here the similarity ended. With the dancers on stage, the performers could no longer meet the gaze of the spectators. Tourists now sat in the dark and were free to gaze without feeling like a voyeur, knowing there was no chance the dancers could see them. The size of the audiences also helped to alienate the hula from its viewers, as tourists seldom felt a personal connection to the performance. The individual was merely one in a crowd of spectators. This also made it acceptable to stare because everyone else was staring. By gathering tourists together in a large crowd and concealing them in the shadows of a darkened dinner theater, tourists were no longer asked to be respectful.

The hula was also commodified by being placed not just on any stage, but on a hotel stage, one with no tradition or history and one that represented nothing but the supplying of goods for tourists. Hotel stages are not the same as stages in a theater, and the Royal Hawaiian stage was set up in front of dinner tables much like a cabaret. By placing the hula on such a stage, the genres of “authentic tradition,” “art form,” and “entertainment” became so mixed that the dance belonged to none of them. Being performed on a stage, the hula could no longer call itself a “traditional dance,” while being performed in a hotel meant the hula could not call itself an “art form” either. Instead the hula became a performance without a history. Hula shows just became hotel entertainments, a category that did not demand any cultural respect.

⁵⁸ Desmond, *Staging Tourism*, xiii.

Hawaiian hula is allocated to hotels and tourists, European ballet to concert halls and elite audiences. The ballet is performed to respectful silence; at hotels, hula is accompanied by the audiences' consumption of lomi lomi salmon, poi, pork, Mai Tais, Blue Hawaiians – food, drink, dance and music served up as signifiers of paradise...and the audiences pay handsomely for it. ⁵⁹

Placing the hula inside the hotel and performing it with dinner kept the dance from developing into an art form, from being taken seriously, and from providing an authentic experience. It was trapped indoors where its only function was to serve the hotel guests.

Finally as the audiences did not view the performance as artistic creations, the hula lost all its integrity as a dance. Dancers began “wearing ti-leaf skirts, cotton blouses, outsized artificial carnations leis and hibiscus flowers in their hair.”⁶⁰ Instead of displaying connections to an ancient past, the hula became a “show business of sex, comedy and ‘cultural education,’” and the display of the body was reduced to “sexual innuendos or comic relief.”⁶¹ Clement Greenberg, the twentieth-century critic, would call this version of the hula “kitsch.”⁶² For Greenberg, “kitsch” is a copy or simulacra of a piece of art or culture that asks for nothing of its viewers but money.⁶³ The leisure tourists of the 1920's were looking for experiences that demanded time, cultivation, and exploration. In the 1950's tourists no longer wanted to spend much time learning; they

⁵⁹ Buck, *Paradise Remade*, 5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Clement Greenberg, “Avant -garde and Kitsch” *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978),10.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

wanted instant gratification. Mass culture served people who did not know how to evaluate culture and did not want to.⁶⁴ As soon as the hula stopped sanctifying the body of its dancers, this body became open to commodification. Once the audiences saw the shaking of the hips as funny, plastic skirts and coconut bras became acceptable costumes. Once tourists wanted “kitsch,” the hula girl’s image could be made into magnets and the bobbing-head dolls placed in the front of cars.

Conclusion

In tracing the many different functions the hula has played, different styles the steps have taken, and the different expectations tourists and audiences have placed on the dance leading to its commodification, one can learn a great deal about the malleability of dance. Most cultural practices could never have survived the many transformations the hula has endured. In each of its transformations the hula has used the bodies of its dancers to display what it means to be Hawaiian, in both a positive and negative sense. In the beginning the hula used the bodies of Hawaiians to demonstrate religious worship, interpret chronicles of history, and communicate current events. With the arrival of the missionaries, the hula was transformed into an ordered “American” social dance to train Hawaiians how to move and act in a “civilized” Western way. For a short period the hula developed as a Western social dance, but as America gained more control over the territory and the demands of tourism began to take hold, the hula changed as much as Hawaiian identity. However, it was in the hula’s function as proof of authenticity and finally as a hotel commodity that the dance truly presented what it was like to be a Hawaiian in the 1950’s. In exploring the commodification of the hula, this thesis has explored what those in power wanted from the bodies of Hawaiians and how they

⁶⁴ Ibid.

projected these desires by turning the presentation of what it meant to be Hawaiian into something easily manipulated for a tourist buck. In tracing how the Royal Hawaiian Hotel devalued the hula, this thesis was really exploring how tourism of the 1950's devalued the people of Hawaii.

However, in examining the hula's durability, this thesis also proves the Hawaiian will to survive. The dance has changed constantly, but it has never lost its audience. The hula has been performed for gods, chiefs, missionaries, royalty, elite and middle-class tourists, and it still packs in audiences today. The hula's connection to the body has entertained, informed, and taught people for centuries, and it will continue to do so for years to come. It is fascinating to think that a cultural practice of the body has been sought after by so many different people and in so many different contexts. In looking at the history of the commodification of the hula, it becomes clear how easily the body can be structured and reshaped to fit current social and political conditions. However, what the hula truly represents is the importance of dance as culture. Although the hula was profaned, it was never forgotten. Dance has always created a sense of community, both in its performers and in its audience, which is why the hula will survive in Hawaii no matter what the political situation. The hula demonstrates how dance can be manipulated, yet it also testifies to its ability to adapt and survive.

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