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Images of Hawaii for Children: Cultural Deprivileging and Reprivileging

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Images of Hawaii for Children: Cultural Deprivileging and Reprivileging¹ In a recent visit to Honolulu, President George Bush acknowledged the importance of the Pacific in the remarkably changing world in which we live by formally meeting, for the first time in American history, with the assembled heads of state of Polynesia (Kresnak Al). But palm trees, scantily clad women, strong brown men husking coconuts, and a naively Rousseauian romanticism continue, I believe, to create an amorphous, uninformed image of Polynesia in most Western minds. From utopia to exotica to erotica, Hawaii has been variously presented in book form during the 200 years since its "discovery" by Westerners an event which occurred perhaps 1,700 years after the archipelago's "discovery" by other people, people of color who lacked the technology of

print to tout what they had done. Every "discovery" carries with it subtexts of preconceptions and perspectives, and the marketing of the Pacific and particularly of Hawaii as a colony and later as a state of the United States in books for children reveals a remarkably consistent Eurocentric bias, despite majority indigenous populations that look not West, but South and East. After all, "the struggle for political control is a struggle for the images in our heads" (Major 4), for the way we perceive and understand a "fact," an event, a culture. In the historical overview that follows, we will see that images of Hawaii and Polynesia have given Westerners more than an eye-ful of their own bias as the islands were "opened"-through children's books as well as through missionary zeal and gunboat diplomacy. While published accounts, especially in England, of the eighteenth-century European voyages of discovery in the Pacific were both numerous and often lavish, their audiences were decidedly adult and their interests lay in cartography and in presenting to "civilized" audiences imperialistic "curiosities" of botany, biology, and anthropology.² Privileged children of course had access to these elegant texts, but the first books in English specifically for children about the Pacific did not seem to appear until the last third of the nineteenth century, usually in the long-to-endure form of journalistic travelogues, such as *The Boy Travellers in Japan and China* from 1879 or *Young Americans in Japan* from 1882 [slides 1, 2].³ There were few nineteenth-century books for children about Hawaii; what were printed were almost exclusively didactic or religious treatises, translations of the Bible or New England primers into Hawaiian for the edification of the "heathen" children now "safely" under Protestant missionary care.⁴ But with the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy by armed American forces in 1898 and the subsequent full retention of Hawaii as both an economic and military colony of the United States, books for children—white, mainland children, that is—began to appear with some frequency. Since Hawaii now finally "belonged" to the United States, it became an attractive, and apparently "safe" vacation destination, and tourism boomed in the age of the great steamships. Cheap paperbound books, such as *Kala of Hawaii* from the twenties, the equivalent of today's souvenir t-shirt, marketed an image of a carefree childhood composed of surfing and happily husking coconuts [slides 3, 4]. Kala's father of course does not need to work, he merely surfs at Waikiki with his son, and we must assume that most Hawaiian people do likewise; the history and role of women in the culture is virtually ignored, as it had been by almost all previous Western commentators.⁵ While the production values and plot of Alice Cooper Bailey's *Kimo* in 1928 are significantly more sophisticated (even if there are clear echoes of Jessie Wilcox Smith and Edmund Dulac in the illustrations), the images tell a similar story: life for the Hawaiian people is filled with nearly-naked pleasure as one surfs, surfs, and surfs [slides 5, 6]. Notice the Caucasian features of the "Hawaiian" girl [slide 7]; even more surprising, however, are what appear to be the snow-clad Canadian Rockies in the background. This is life as the audience dreamed or demanded that it be, not life as it was; the reality was much grimmer decimation of the Hawaiian people through disease...

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