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Picturing Hawai'i: The "Ideal" Native and the Origins of Tourism, 1880-1915

Jane Desmond

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

Picturing Hawai'i: The "Ideal" Native and the Origins of Tourism, 1880-1915

Jane C. Desmond (bio)*

In April 1995 I was flying from Honolulu to Hilo, Hawai'i, to watch the Merrie

Monarch Hula Festival, the islands' leading hula competition. The plane was filled with excited participants and spectators, and the in-flight magazine, *Pacific Connections*, featured the festival on its cover: a contemporary sepia-toned photo of a female dancer, Ku'uleialoha Rivera.¹ The background is airbrushed out, accenting the lines of the figure, a young woman with arms extended, gaze directed upward, costumed in a profusion of greenery covering an otherwise apparently bare torso. At her waist is a very short skirt, loose strips of bark cloth parted to reveal a bare thigh. The intensity of her gaze, the controlled angle of her arms, and the precision with which her fingertips are folded together into a flower shape all indicate a serious, well-trained performer. But this is nevertheless a highly ambivalent image. **[End Page 459]**

This nostalgic evocation of the past, used to promote an event of key significance to Native Hawaiians and others involved in hula, is also an unsettling reminder of another era, one that turns up just a few pages later. A large advertisement for a Hilo gallery selling vintage Hawaiian photography features two other sepia-toned photos of bare-breasted hula dancers in ti-leaf skirts. Posed in photographers' studios around the turn of the century, these dancers lacked the breast-covering leis of the magazine photo. Their near-nudity constructed a different version of Hawaiian women. If the cover photo was meant to celebrate a pre-European-contact past, before the missionaries covered breasts, brought cloth skirts, and drove the hula underground, these photographs did likewise, but with very different intent. The title of the gallery advertisement, "Buying and Selling," prompts the question, Buying and selling what to whom? The answer is found in the nexus of visual representation, "primitivism," and the version of the feminine that the old photographs—early icons of an emerging tourist industry—promoted.

In this article, I suggest that turn-of-the-century imperial expansion, "scientific" discourses of race, and visual representations, including photographs, stereoscopes, and postcards, combined to produce a

Euramerican notion of Native Hawaiians as “ideal natives.”² I excavate the historically specific production of this Euramerican fantasy and argue further that this particular depiction of the ideal, buttressed by educational writings, set the stage for the rise of tourism to the islands. Similar notions of “ideal natives” remain implicit in today’s tourist discourse, despite the Native Hawaiian cultural renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s and the strong anticolonialist sentiments of some branches of today’s Native Hawaiian Sovereignty movement.

A century ago this ideal image emerged amid the same social and political conditions that fostered the birth of tourism as an organized industry: imperial expansion combined with bourgeois desires for contact with the rejuvenating “primitive.” But despite a generalized Anglo-Saxon longing for “primitives,” not just any primitive would do. Hawaiians—and especially Hawaiian women—occupied a special position in the Caucasian imagination. Native Hawaiians were seen as attractive, warm, welcoming, unthreatening, generous hosts. Importantly, Euramericans perceived them as “brown,” not “black,” “red,” or “yellow,” in the colorist terminologies of [End Page 460] the day. For elite, white mainlanders Hawaiians seemed to offer an alluring encounter with paradisaical exoticism, a nonthreatening soft primitivism—primitive, yes, but delightfully so.³

The Beginnings of Organized Tourism

The commodification and marketing of this perception began with organized tourism. Euramericans had visited Hawai’i prior to the turn of the century, of course. But the development of tourism as a concerted commercial venture was new and coincided with the end of the Hawaiian monarchy. In 1893 American-backed businessmen, many of whom were plantation owners and descendants of U.S. missionaries, overthrew the monarchy headed by Queen Lili’uokalani. Subsequently, Hawai’i was annexed to the United States in 1898, despite protests by Native Hawaiians,⁴ and in 1900 became a U.S. territory. U.S. intervention in Hawai’i echoed that in Guam, Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico and

was part of the...



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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
muse@press.jhu.edu



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Uses of Hawaiian ferns, socialization is what connects the exciter.

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Hawaiian loanwords in English, entrepreneurial risk, according to the traditional view

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