

ANNE KEALA KELLY

## Haolewood

### Colonial Codes, Kapu Narratives, and Kanaka `Ōiwi Discourse



*A young Kamehameha*

© Herb Kane

Protocol. I am Kanaka `Ōiwi (Hawaiian) through my mother and both of her parents. My people are from the island of Hawai`i; my grandfather was born in Na`alehu in the district of Ka`u and my grandmother and mother in Kealia, South Kona.<sup>1</sup> My father was a second generation American of Irish ancestry, and his people are from County Cork and Northern Ireland. I was born and raised almost entirely in Southern California, except when we lived with my grandparents in Honaunau in my early teens.

It's protocol for Hawaiians to share familial genealogy and I do so here because, as Taiiaki Alfred says, "The Western view of power and human relationships is so thoroughly entrenched that it appears valid, objective, and natural: it has become what Jens Bartleson has called 'the unthought foundation of political knowledge.'"<sup>2</sup> Personal genealogy is political in the Hawaiian context. And this paper is a political argument against stealing Hawaiian

culture and identity via all forms of media, with a focus on the Sony Pictures feature film project about King Kamehameha.

Because Hawaiians remain the largest out-migrating group in Hawai`i, with 40% of all Hawaiians now living on the continental U.S.,<sup>3</sup> identifying in this manner goes far in connecting us to each other and to our shared homeland. And Hawai`i is a homeland to all Hawaiians no matter where they reside or what other ethnicities they possess. In Hawaiian terms, one remains connected through the labyrinth of ancestral pathways. Literal physical existence is premised on those who came before, as expressed in the popular political adage "we are who we were."<sup>4</sup> To Hawaiians, the physical manifestation is imbued with mana--spiritual and physical energy inherited through blood and bones, the DNA of our ancestors. Any system of thought or politics that attempts to define Hawaiian identity based on notions of blood

quantum, behavior, or physical appearance is not Hawaiian in origin, but rather haole (Euro-American) in both origin and motivation. Imposition of this type of measurement is ground zero for displacing Hawaiians psychologically and physically.

King Kamehameha The Great's genealogy is Kanaka `Ōiwi. To say he was Polynesian is like saying someone is European. In historical terms, the idea of an American national of Samoan and African ancestry playing Kamehameha is predicated politically and ideologically upon the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom<sup>5</sup> and subsequent U.S. military occupation and ongoing theft of Hawaiian land.

Keeping with the organizing principal of genealogy, it is relevant to consider the historic events between Hawai'i and the United States, including violations of international and domestic laws and overt racism and cultural suppression. The impact of this history and the continued forced Americanization of Hawai'i and its indigenous people is precisely what enabled screenwriter Greg Poirer, wrestler-turned-actor Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson and Sony Pictures to steal Kamehameha's mo'olelo. Their explicit theft of Hawaiian identity not only mirrors, but also reinforces the American theft of land and culture.

Money and military power have dominated public discourse since 9-11, an event that has tragically become an excuse to impose American dominance over the entire planet and reaffirm American supremacy. In Hawai'i, the American military presence has been the historic marker for oppressing and controlling Hawaiians since the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893 and the subsequent illegal military occupation that continues to this day.<sup>6</sup> If not for the presence of the American military in Hawai'i, there would be no need for this or possibly any discussion of cultural theft or racism against Hawaiians because Hawaiians would be self-determining and constructing their own film and print narratives. But the occupying force that keeps natives in a numbing state of

fear continues, and haole people still live a "colonial"<sup>7</sup> life in Hawai'i. As is typically the case in colonial settings, haole people are at the top of a socio-economic structure imposed upon the native population.

It's with an interventionist spirit that I say screenwriter Greg Poirer's unwelcome claim to ownership of Hawaiian mo'olelo is a nauseating spectacle. Such a criticism is intended to deflect the invasive ideology of anyone who believes that Hawaiians should just accept Americanization. The years of socialized invisibility and colonial abuse have all but erased the expectations of the native people. Whether directly or indirectly, as a consequence of the hubris of haole culture it's clear that the cultural, and thus psychological wellbeing of native Hawaiians is sacrificed for the entertainment of the culturally vapid and the coffers of connected capital. *Lilo and Stitch*<sup>8</sup> is a prime example: it depicts a Hawaiian child as violent and lazy; but many Hawaiians embrace it simply because it's some acknowledgement of their existence in the media of empire. However, Hawaiians can no longer afford to look upon the outcome of the haole interpretation of Hawaiian existence as a side effect or natural consequence of the American narrative process, whether that creation is fiction or non-fiction, cartoon or live action, journalism or fashion.

In film and other forms of media, racism is always lurking, never quite extinguished, a pathogen that behaves as any virus does, eating away at the host's immune system, or in this case our collective intellectual and spiritual conscience. As Neil Postman notes:

Like the mind, a medium is a use to which a physical apparatus is put. A technology becomes a medium as it employs a particular symbolic code, as it finds its place in a particular social setting, as it insinuates itself into economic and political context...a medium is the social and intellectual environment a machine creates.<sup>9</sup>

Elided and marginalized by today's media, why should Hawaiians have even the slimmest faith in something depicting and representing Hawaiians that is written, produced and starring non-Hawaiians? A

one hundred million dollar budget does not justify the cultural, creative and political usurpation of one of our most kapu mō'ī, King Kamehameha The Great. It's absurd to expect Hawaiians to trust Sony Pictures, Greg Porier, or the caricature acting that Dwayne Johnson is famous for. Furthermore, it's a culturally abusive situation in which real Hawaiians will further be made complicit and exploited as actors in their own debasement. The idea that Hawaiians should or ultimately will approve of the project is a perspective supported by the political and business reductionism typical of Hollywood filmmaking.

Greg Porier, a haole man from Maui, sold his treatment of the Kamehameha story to Sony Pictures because Johnson, a non-Hawaiian, agreed to play the role. Sony Pictures then bankrolled the writing of the script and hired action director Rob Cohen to helm the project. The film will be in English, a language Kamehameha did not speak and it will star fake Hawaiians like Johnson who will reinforce stereotypical images and eclipse any chance of Hawaiian reality ever making it to the screen.

A chapter in Houston Wood's *Displacing Natives* is entitled "Safe Savagery: Hollywood's Hawai'i." Wood cites Laura Mulvey's "advanced representational system:"

Films produce multilayered representations that seem to most members of the metropole to mirror reality with an immediacy and verisimilitude that written texts lack. The great power of this advanced representational system derives in part from its ability to include viewers within its frame, to offer an engaged position to its spectators.<sup>10</sup>

Representation on the screen is closely

tied to the psycho-sexual, iconic and socio-political codes belonging to particular audiences and makers of film. The filmmakers choose cultural signifiers and shape the narrative. Hawaiians were shifted from subject to object by the cultural and political invasiveness that informed Porier's initial act of writing the treatment. The argument that Johnson, as a Samoan, possesses the requisite ancestry to represent Hawaiians and Hawaiian-ness is ethically dubious. The assertion that his Polynesian-ness gives the producers the "right" to do this film is based on American hierarchical ideals that have as much to do with the legacy of America's caste system, as it does with the tradition of casting complicit non-natives in politically contested spaces. In this Sony Pictures film about one of the most important Hawaiian political and historical figures, the neo-colonial code has already been reinforced before one frame of film has moved through the gate.

The very contemplation of this film is an appropriation that recalls the economically motivated illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, and the financial boon for Euro-American expatriates and the United States that still accompanies the theft of Hawaiian land, culture, and rights to Hawaiian self-determination. When Porier stole this Hawaiian story and sold it to Sony Pictures, the gun used was the racist presumption of American entitlement. That presumption is underscored by, and to a large extent, supported by, a continuing illegal U.S. military occupation that enforces cultural, political, psychological, and economic oppression of Kanaka `Ōiwi.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> It is the writer's choice to not italicize non-English words, as is the institutionalized standard.

<sup>2</sup> Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: an indigenous manifesto*. Canada, Oxford University Press, 1999, (p. 63). Alfred is a Mohawk scholar known for his work on Native nationalism.

<sup>3</sup> 2000 U.S. Census Report.

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<sup>4</sup> Inspired by the title of a film produced by Nā Maka O Ka `Aina in 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Noenoe Silva, Ph.D., "Kanakanā Maoli Resistance to Annexation," *Ōiwi: a native hawaiian journal*. 1998, (p. 47).

<sup>6</sup> O'ahu is home to PACOM, the largest military command in the world, and the U.S. military is presently engaged in the largest military expansion in Hawai'i since WWII.

<sup>7</sup> Although following WWII Hawai'i was on the UN's list of colonized territories, Hawai'i was never politically or legally a colony, but rather an independent nation state; the word is invoked here to communicate the social order of things. See <http://www.hawaiiankingdom.org> for legal and historical references.

<sup>8</sup> *Lilo and Stitch*, dirs. Chris Sanders, Dean DeBlois, 80 min., 2002, The Walt Disney Company, videocassette.

<sup>9</sup> Postman, Neil, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. New York, Penguin Group, 1985, (p. 84).

<sup>10</sup> Wood, Houston, *Displacing Natives: The Rhetorical Production of Hawai'i*. New York, Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 1999, (p. 103).



*Kamehameha the Great, by Louis Choris, circa 1819*