Adria L. Imada examines the United States’ colonisation of Hawai‘i through the control of hula from the late 1800s until the mid-20th century. The U.S. elite in Hawai‘i used hula—through prominent positioning of largely mixed-race female dancers’ bodies—to create an image of the U.S.-Hawai‘i colonial relationship as intimate, pacified and mutually desired. The title, Aloha America, was the phrase that hung over the first Hawaiian exhibit at the World’s Fair in 1876 during the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. Imada positions this highly contextualised phrase, “aloha”, which references diverse sentiments such as “love, sympathy, pity, joy, compassion, affection, veneration and mercy” (p. 8) as a metaphor for the ambivalent and imagined intimate relationship between Hawai‘i and the United States.

In the introduction, Imada questions how dissent for the U.S. colonial project and the native Hawaiian practice of decolonisation has been, and continues to be, categorised as direct activities of resistance and rebellion. Such categorisation, she argues, dismisses practices and experiences that “produce counter-memories that contest sedimented histories or settler colonialism and sustain decolonizing processes (p. 15).” Imada seeks to reconceptualise hula performances, during American colonisation, as acts that countered colonialism through the Hawaiian dancers’ and cultural brokers’ bodily movements and life experiences on and off the national and international stage.

In five ethnographically-rich chapters, Imada accomplishes her twofold aim of reclaiming “low-ranking knowledge of (neo)colonial subjects” and finding the “hidden transcripts” that reveal hula performers’ desires and lived-experience by conducting open-ended interviews with the performers and their families, and analysing personal collections of objects and photography, performance repertoires, and official and unofficial archives.

One of many strengths of Imada’s work in Hawai‘i is her focus on telling the complex history of hula—one of intrigue, disdain, limitation and opportunities—through the intimate lives of performers such as Kini Kapahukulaokamāmalu (Kini Kapahu). Kini Kapahu is first introduced in Chapter One while training and performing traditional forms of hula and western instruments for King Kalākaua and his eclectic guest list of commoners, elite, foreigners and natives in the 1880s. In Chapter Two, Imada challenges the over-determined conceptualisation of hula performers in the
tourist circuit, as puppets in the coloniser’s stage. She successful shows how they “used” the tourist performance circuit to achieve their own cosmopolitan desires while keeping “alive” Hawaiian culture, identity and practices even while transforming them. In these U.S. and international hula circuits, hula performers such as Kini Kapahu created lives and identities that countered the images “controlled” by American colonists and “protected” by nationalist Hawaiians. We learn the lesser-known story of Hawaiian native cultural brokers, such as Johnny Wilson, who managed and directed several hula performances in the U.S. and international locales in the early and mid-1900s, later marrying Kini Kapahu and becoming a popular political figure in Hawai‘i. Thousands of miles away from the American territorial government, cultural brokers like Mr. Wilson presented competing representations of Hawaiians and displayed opposition to U.S. colonial practices through subversive dances and chants that entertained white audiences.

In Chapter Four, Imada shows how the popularity of “things” Hawaiian, including hula, grew exponentially in the 1930s, with Americans looking to escape the economic depression, and continued into subsequent decades, substantiating the creation of Hawai‘i-specific spaces, such as the Hawaiian Room at the Lexington Room in NYC, which concretised the colonial fantasy year-round. In these entertainment clubs, the hula dancers reigned supreme as objectified sexual beings. These spaces created a demand for full-time hula dancers, which created high-level opportunities for them within careers unattainable to women in Hawai‘i.

In Chapter Five, Imada elegantly shows how live-hula performances fell short of selling the fantasy of hospitality, mutual desire and tropical abundance in situ. Selling the Hawaiian fantasy of aloha and intimacy between the U.S. and Hawai‘i to thousands of American troops in a militarised and poverty-stricken Hawai‘i became the job of cameras. U.S. military-funded photography and films created a decontextualised image of imperial hospitality by strategically cutting out of the camera frame the realities of urban slums and disgruntled locals, and the significant presence of “questionable” ethnic communities such as the Japanese, African Americans and Puerto Ricans. Finally, the epilogue provides an update of hula’s respected and, increasingly lesser-known, politicised position within the contemporary Hawaiian sovereignty and self-determination movement.

This book was a joy to read, full of intimate narratives and visual images of women and men in the hula circuits whose day-to-day actions, like wearing fur coats instead of a cellophane skirts at professional photo shoots and befriending other “staged” natives during the world fairs, countered the colonial “Hawaiian” image that deprived colonised woman of humanity and personal desire. Imada’s careful reconstruction of hula’s past reinserts into Hawaiian history not only colourful portraits of hula performers but also native Hawaiian women and men as cosmopolitan trailblazers and preservers and exhibitors of Hawaiian traditions. This book places as significant the experiences of women’s travelling lives and politicises the everyday choices that these women made as significant to the political and spiritual process of decolonisation. This work could benefit however from a focused discussion on decolonisation and its relation to notions of self-determination both within current scholarship and among Native Hawaiians. Such a discussion would highlight the significance of
focusing in on the lives and desires of these hula performers. This quibble aside, Aloha America, with a brief but useful glossary of Ōlelo Hawai‘i words and English equivalents, is ideal for undergraduate courses on gender, tourism, colonialism and ethnic relation, and histories of the U.S., Hawaii and the Pacific, or, because of its ample use of oral histories, ethnographic field notes and archival documents, graduate courses on ethnographic research methods. Overall, Aloha America is an excellent example of how scholars can use oral histories to examine the archival past and salvage stories, experiences and histories that are seemingly forgotten, silenced or otherwise marginalised.


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As a result of numerous cultural resource management and academic projects, archaeologists have now developed a large dataset to interpret Hawaiian prehistory. A result of this proliferation of archaeology over the past four decades is the need for synthesis. This book continues Patrick Kirch’s efforts to do just that. Of interest to Kirch in this synthesis is the development of the only “pristine state” encountered by Europeans during the historic period. He argues that Hawai‘i represents a model system to evaluate endogamous political development, and to understand a political system that was unique in terms of structure and complexity in Polynesia. By tracing the development of Hawaiian society from its ancestral roots in Southeast Asia to encounters with James Cook at Kealakekua, Kirch identifies cultural patterns and presents theoretical ideas of culture change. He argues that the interaction of long- and short-term processes, termed ultimate and proximate causes, results in the society described at European contact. This society, according to Kirch, is best described as an archaic state, the development of which “was a remarkable replay of the histories of other societies in similarly favourable conditions throughout both the Old World and the New” (pp. 289).

Given Kirch’s experience throughout the Pacific, he is uniquely able to create a cohesive story spanning over 3000 years and the entire Pacific Ocean. He begins the book in a prologue recounting the impetus for its writing, describing European accounts of Hawaiian society, and briefly equating the society to other comparable political systems across the globe. He then turns to a discussion of personal experience, a technique continually and effectively used throughout the book, to bring the reader into the mindset of the modern-day archaeologist musing about the past. Such returns to his experiences illustrate the process of archaeological enquiry to both an audience familiar with the practice and interested in this particular situation, and an audience relatively unfamiliar with the discipline.