Response to Day 2 of Folktales and Fairy Tales Symposium
Heather Diamond

This symposium addresses important issues of translation, colonialism, and cinema as they are refracted through the dynamic and ever-adaptable lens of folktales and fairy tales. All three key issues coincide or collide in the presentations by Sadhana Naithani and Noenoe Silva. Each of these scholars examines a filmic translation of a folktale or fairy tale that has been assigned new meaning in relation to its particular colonial or post-colonial context.

Translation between disciplines
Within this symposium, translation has been discussed primarily as a language to language issue that stresses the importance of cultural context to meaning-making and the potential for distortion when language and context are changed. For the most part, we are dealing with folktales and fairy tales that have been translated many times and in many ways. Most were first translated from oral to written versions and often then to languages different from those in which they were told. A related elephant in the room is the discursive gap incurred when scholars from different disciplines come together without a common lexicon or set of valuations with which to comb through the topic at hand. Folklorists understand and speak of folktales and fairy tales as disciplinary genres with certain conventions and characteristics. However, outside of the field we can sometimes still hear these terms used as pejoratives. They may be dismissed as “just folklore” with the presumption that they are simply fanciful and false or infantilized as only children’s stories, etc.
Folktales and fairy tales are high-context performances, but their contexts have evolved and been altered by historical and cultural change, and they have been appropriated and manipulated into new contexts by literary and film adaptations. We might think then that context is no longer relevant; however, Naithani’s answer about a question on Bollywood—that there is a cultural knowledge, expectation, and perception difference between global and Indian audiences—underlines the importance of context to an appreciation of form and function as well as an understanding of history and power relations implicit in a folktale or fairy tale as well as its frame. In traditional settings, folktales and fairy tales, as well as other forms of oral narrative, are easily understood by insiders, those who know the codes and conventions. Like good guys and bad in old westerns, folktale and fairy tale characters are simply ugly or beautiful. Their external appearances mirror their interiors. There is no need to flesh out characters when the audience can imagine characters like themselves. There is a constant tension between innovation and stability in oral narratives, which follow community conventions yet are enriched by the skill of a practiced storyteller. Indirect community control is exerted through the fulfillment of audience expectation and the imposition of certain codes like formulaic openings and ending and repetition. These factors are frozen in literary and film adaptations.

Folktales and fairy tales embody alternative forms of knowledge. Ideally, audiences participate in storytelling through willing suspension of disbelief, a practice that forms the audience into a collective community of belief or at least one that welcomes the seemingly impossible. It is this community of belief that supports the narrative. In the context of this symposium, we have seen examples of the wonder tale in
translation from communities of belief to our own community of scholarly disbelief. In Naithani’s examples from India, the folktale makes a transition from communities of belief to colonial disbelief and back to culturally supported contexts that may or may not imply some level of belief. According to Silva, mo’olelo are histories made fabulous “in a world not yet disenchanted,” in which distinctions were not made between true and untrue stories. In both cases, the folktale’s relative truth is located in belief and that belief is located before, beyond, and outside of colonialism. If we begin with the supposition that each folk narrative contains an inherent truth, we begin to resist the colonial project’s insistence on invalidation through scientific superiority and hedge against academia’s culturally supported need to explain away the inexplicable/unbelievable and impose order on the seeming disorder of folk narrative.

Appropriation and preservation through translation

When contexts are changed, texts are assigned new meanings from outside to make them relevant to new audiences and environments. In the collection, redaction, and recontextualization of folk narratives, literary conventions, literalness, scientific thinking, and western notions of history are often imposed on a form that speaks metaphorically and always makes meaning contextually. As Naithani asserts, change is a constant and, in appropriation and adaptation, meaning-making and value are caught in a dialectic where a disconnect from one context (small community setting) makes way for a connect in a new context (broader reading or film-going audiences), and new texts, including invented traditions, are absorbed and circulated in the construction of a generalized pan-identity.
Of course, relationships of power are implicated when folklore is collected for national and imperialistic agendas. In Nazi Germany, World War II Japan, and 20th-century China, appropriated folktales provided fodder for solidifying nationalism. Naithani and Silva reveal that this process is not a simple one-way street in which folktales are ineradicably contaminated and devalued. While collection projects in Hawai‘i and India may have imposed colonial filters, folk-narrative collections have been archived and re-circulated to the public and to scholars. Collections provide resources for research and cultural recuperation by formerly colonized subjects. Because many Hawaiian tales were transcribed by Native Hawaiians in the Hawaiian language, the main difference between folktale collection in India and Hawai‘i is that in Hawai‘i, the primary translation filters were print and belief (most Hawaiians converted to Christianity) rather than the layered filters of print, an imposed language, and an imperial gaze.

Tourism thrives on using folktales rooted in colonialism. Naithani’s notion of a collaboratively constructed “folktale called India” could as easily be applied to China or Hawai‘i. In China, folktales are one of the touristic tools used to promote an image of harmonious diversity for the nation through re-framing regions populated by ethnic minorities to represent the whole. Yunnan functions as China’s folkloric poster-child in the same way that Rajasthan is made to represent folkloric India. In Hawai‘i, tourism has adopted Native Hawaiian folk narratives to characterize the landscape and the Native people while promoting American multiculturalism. This use of folktales as a vehicle for constructing the tourist imaginary and national ethos is complicated by the fact that tourism also provides venues for cultural preservation, revival, and reinvention. Like folklore collection, it can be seen as both a colonial imposition and a cultural resource.
Translation to cinema

Many wonder tales have been transposed into fantastic films, often with similar effects. I am reminded of China’s folktale-inspired epic *Journey to the West*, which continues to inspire film spinoffs with fanciful special effects. Even its film versions rely on cultural embedded knowledge of the storyline and references for its humor and impact. When the characters speak Cantonese in Hong Kong versions, Mandarin subtitles or dubbing are imposed as the “highest” common denominator, resulting in some of the humor and flavor being lost. *Journey to the West* has also been adopted in Japan, where it has been re-contextualized and appropriated in a new form. Likewise, the films shown and discussed in this symposium have taken culture-specific content to new locations and levels.

Cinematic adaptations redact fairy tales into unified Ur-tales that become definitive by virtue of their dissemination and medium. The need to flesh out characters from the perceived “flatness” of folk narrative establishes the authority of the filmmaker as well as the audience as arbiters of meaning. Reading the cinematic examples from India and Hawai‘i against each other is very instructive. As pointed out by Vilsoni Heroniko, recontextualization of folk narrative creates tension between the cultural specificity of the settings and the essentialized, universalized themes propounded by the films. In the case of a Bollywood film, cinematic language becomes a common denominator redacting audiences into a unified target. This produces large audiences of cultural consumers, who, in turn, become participants in group identity construction. The use of folklore (material, belief, as well as colonially re-produced folk narrative) engages
audiences familiar with the cultural references as well as those who are attracted to the exotic. The medium also produces new aestheticized texts that enter back into communities with new meanings divorced from belief. In Hawai‘i, where there has been a historical disruption of language and indigenous belief, film serves as a medium for cultural revival, recuperating language and lore in altered forms. Film and the mo‘olelo are utilized as teaching tools for the Hawaiian language. The desire for authenticity in Hawaiian language and lore is challenging since the new oral community is being cultivated over disrupted collective memory and transmission, and belief is filtered through academic inquiry and political agendas.

**Folktales through a post-colonial lens**

In discussing the potential to decolonize folklore, there are three themes that have emerged. First, as Naithani has said, to get outside the re-circulation of meanings derived from colonial projects requires the re-contextualization of texts and re-positing authority and agency with tale tellers rather than collectors, scholars, and the media. However, it is important to recognize that re-inscribing cultural contexts is a daunting task and sometimes involves changing mindsets on a large scale. In India, for example, traditional artists are looked down on yet exploited as a cultural resource for the cinematic industry and tourism. This conundrum was illustrated when the Smithsonian Museum presented India in its annual Folk life Festival. Folk artists recognized as national assets abroad returned home to their former untouchable status. Second, it is worth noting that the tools of colonialism can be turned back on themselves when there has been a cultural disruption due to colonialism. In Hawai‘i, translations into print and English provided a
resource to be mined in the resuscitation of cultural memory. Silva demonstrates that folk narratives can be potent tools of self-recognition, cultural recuperation, identity reclamation, and community identity. Finally, as pointed out by Caroline Sinavaiana, there is an ongoing need for self-analysis among scholars. While non-indigenous scholars must guard against presumed authority and exoticism, indigenous scholars must be careful that the longing for meaning and cultural recuperation does not result in romanticization, assigned meanings, or over-simplified trajectories.

Perhaps most telling in the various levels of translation encountered here are the relative social functions of folktale and fairy tales in indigenous and non-indigenous contexts. While folktales have often viewed as historical and ethnographic remnants by collectors, Silva asserted that in indigenous contexts, folk narratives serve as testimonials. Steven Winduo and Caroline Sinavaiana provided examples from Papua New Guinea and Samoa, respectively. Folktale continue to have cultural currency, attraction, resilience, longevity, adaptability, borrowability, and beauty. Whether as tools of cultural and political hegemony or of resistance, they are meaningful precisely because people continue to find them meaningful.