

Introduction: Before and After the Symposium

by Cristina Bacchilega

The announcement to faculty and students at the University of Hawai‘i-Mānoa publicizing the international symposium “Folktales and Fairy Tales: Translation, Colonialism, and Cinema” in 2008 read: “We intend to explore the significance of folk and fairy tales within the contemporary world in a manner that is interdisciplinary and attentive to our location in the Pacific. This symposium seeks to stimulate conversations among scholars of folktales, fairy tales, and contemporary culture by focusing on social practices—translation and colonialism—that have, in different ways, shaped the history of both genres. Through public lectures, panel responses, and a public roundtable, we seek to make Hawaiian, Hawai‘i-based, Pacific, and Asian concerns more visibly connected with and in critical dialog with the interdisciplinary fields of folklore and fairy-tale studies.”

Featured speakers included scholars from a range of disciplines. Noenoe Silva and Waziyatawin are well-known intellectuals in the fields of Hawaiian and Native American indigenous politics, respectively; Donald Haase, Sadhana Naithani, and Jack Zipes are prominent scholars in folktale and fairy-tale studies, just as Vilsoni Hereniko and Steven Winduo are in Pacific Islands studies and literature. Coming from different discourse communities, these powerhouses of ideas were not necessarily familiar with each other’s work. Other participating scholars, most of them from UHM, came from translation studies, film studies, creative writing, Hawaiian literature, American studies, international cultural studies, and folklore. While some of the lectures attracted an audience of a hundred or more, true to the symposium format, we conducted most of our discussions as

a working group of fifty or so, including active student participants. Graduate students from the Comparativism and Translation in Literary/Cultural Studies research cluster ran the final roundtable. Whether they came from afar or from within the campus and other local communities, the individuals who gathered around the topic engaged each other at the edge or outside of their home disciplines. The symposium was thus meant to function as a productive disciplinary borderland, and at the same time the discussion remained firmly grounded in the histories, knowledges, and perspectives of Hawai‘i and Oceania.

Collectively, the sessions took up interrelated questions about genre, history, translation, media, and place. What needs do folk and fairy tales serve today? What are the implications of the most basic working definitions of folktale and fairy tale in today’s popular culture? How has colonialism enabled *and* thwarted the translation of such narratives and their cultural meanings? How has colonialism shaped dominant discourses about orality and literature? How are the folk and fairy tale being “de-colonized” today? What roles does translation play in transmitting traditional narratives? What is translation’s role in colonialism and de-colonization? Who is transforming stories and for whom? How are these dynamics played out differently depending on the history of a place or people? How are these dynamics played out in Hawai‘i and the Pacific? How have new technologies, from photography and film to the internet, affected translation practices and the construction of tradition? How does film speak effectively to culture-specific and global audiences?

We wanted to focus on folktales and fairy tales within a historicizing framework to which questions of transmission and power are crucial, working against the grain of the popular assumption that the folktale calls out some kind of identity construction

(ethnic, national, gendered) based in “non literary” simplicity, while the fairy tale functions as both a “universal” and artful genre. Even though scholars know that the fairy tale is not an exclusively literary tradition and the folktale is not only an oral narrative, it remains common to polarize the two, and at the same time to invest the modern fairy tale with the magical powers of older or “forgotten” narratives. In a parallel movement, the translation of stories from Western Asia (like *The Arabian Nights*) and other “exotic” places and cultures (including Native America and Hawai‘i) into European languages in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has served an ethnocentric narrative that fed on fantasizing about the “other,” whose histories were trivialized as “folk” or “fairy” stories. Within this ethnocentric construction of the imagination and the “supernatural,” some peoples and some groups have imaginations that reach for the truth, and others have limited ones that are hopelessly untrue and ultimately obsolete.

Clearly, translation—from one language to another, from one culture to another, from one genre to another, from one medium to another, and from one discourse to another—plays a crucial role in the transmission of “traditional” narratives. In the process of translation, these stories are re-contextualized and re-codified—say, from the oral to the page to the screen; or from the discourse of history to that of education to that of children’s entertainment. Thinking of the translation of “traditional” narratives such as folk and fairy tales in relation to colonial practices is not only productive but imperative because “although the history of colonialism varies significantly according to place and period, it does reveal a consistent, no, inevitable reliance on translation” (Venuti 165). At the same time, translation can be a powerful tool to de-colonize the mind.

Since the 1970s in particular, writers, filmmakers, illustrators, and creative artists of all kinds have repeatedly turned to the folktale and the fairy tale to help them explore new artistic forms and to challenge socio-cultural values. Scholars from many different disciplines have also reevaluated conventional wisdom about the fairy tale, rediscovered forgotten folk and fairy-tale traditions, and published important anthologies and new translations that have had academic significance as well as popular success. While feminism placed the fairy tale firmly at the center of an ongoing cultural debate over gender and sexual politics, the worldwide revival of storytelling has sparked renewed interest in traditional tales and, most important to those of us located in Hawai‘i and Oceania, indigenous movements have urged a re-cognition of oral traditions as history and knowledge (Hau‘ofa, Wendt, Whaitiri). Countering both the Hollywood stereotypes of the “native” and the Disneyfication of magic, film has proved a particularly powerful form of translation for this renewed interest in folk and fairy tales. Thus, the translation of folk and fairy tales into film—which has been part of the history of cinema from its beginning—was a central focus for our symposium.

Together with colleagues Professor Vilsoni Hereniko from the Center for Pacific Islands Studies and Professor Noenoe Silva from the Political Science and Hawaiian Language, I was one of the organizers of the symposium so it is not my place to assess whether or how well our hopes for exchange and reflection came to fruition. But in this brief article let me take the opportunity to present some of the questions that animated our symposium and to situate the symposium within a larger scholarly conversation within and about folklore studies, one of the scholarly communities within which I work.

Although folklore is often associated with nationalism, it is not as commonly thought of in connection with colonialism. Yet, just as translation has been integral to the making of colonialism, so have been the collection, publication, and popularization of folklore, its transformation from living practices, narratives, and memory into a “culture” that is othered. At the American Folklore Society meeting in October 2007, the panel “The Coloniality of Power in Folkloristics” (for which I was a respondent) brought together folklorists from different parts of the globe to present different stories of colonialism, each contributing to the thesis that the politics of cultural inequality are basic to the construction of both folkloristics and folklore. I suspect most of us have experience with similar presentations at other scholarly gatherings; this one made an impression on me.

At that panel, Irish scholar Diarmud Ó Giolláin expanded Antonio Gramsci’s intuitions about the “questione meridionale” (the Southern Question) in Italy in order to focus on European nation-states’ internal colonialism. And papers by Charles Briggs and Sadhana Naithani made the case for looking to the 15th-century colonization of South America (see Mignolo) as encounters that crystallized the orality vs. writing opposition into a hierarchy where the illiterate colonized are defined as inferior people with no history other than that which the colonizers will construct for them, by deracinating, textualizing, and translating the stories of the colonized into a teleological framework of progress, the ultimate attainment of which the colonized are structurally denied.

Today’s folklorists are well aware that this colonial representation of the “other” is one of the ways in which modernity shapes itself in contrast to a “traditional” or “pre-modern” subject that is defined not only in terms of class, gender, and education, but

political subjugation and racial inferiority as well. This argument rewrites the history of folklore studies as always already inflected and infected by the colonial encounter of Europeans with non-Europeans and by the power structures of colonialism. It's a powerful argument, one I believe needs to be made and remade. It is not new, but it is not as widely "heard" and attended to as it should be.

Of course, as a discursive formation, folklore studies—as Stuart Hall wrote of cultural studies in 1992—have “no simple origin” but “multiple discourses,” “a number of different histories,” and “many trajectories.” But reading colonialism as a generative force that has shaped folkloristics can provide key insights into this multiplicity. At the same time, it is important for this argument to draw on multiple reckonings with colonialism because, as anthropologist Julie Cruikshank writes in *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, & Social Imagination*, “the aftermaths of colonialism are always local” (9). Recognition of the coupling of colonialism and folkloristics therefore will bring about different projects in different locations.

Nonetheless the legacy of colonialism—as the economic and political control of one people over another—is not itself an isolated local phenomenon, but rather lives on in what Briggs calls the “coloniality of power” that structures not only the economics and ideology of, let's say, “North” and “South,” but also the economics and ideology of contemporary folkloristics in a globalized production and marketing of knowledge. Just as it is a fallacy to think of folklore as a cultural expression confined to the past, we may not have the luxury to think of ourselves today, wherever we are located, as living and writing outside of the economy of colonial ideology. Accepting this coloniality of power in folkloristics may be difficult because colonialism has been one of the most violent

agents of change on this planet, yet its effects are with us, even if they are not always in plain sight. Here I want to offer my localized experience of how this acceptance, while challenging, can be productive.

For some of us colonialism and colonality are in plain sight, which makes the first step—recognizing how the histories of colonialism and folkloristics are interwoven together—easier. An Anglo-Indian Italian woman who grew up in Rome (not the imperial Rome or the fascist colonizing one, but still a city that thrives touristically on that record) and was educated within literature departments in Europe and the United States, I have lived and worked since 1983 in Hawai‘i. Hawai‘i was a sovereign and internationally recognized nation until it was annexed to the United States in 1898 against the will of the majority of Hawaiians, whose petitions and resistance were to no avail. Hawaiian resistance to that violent occupation or, put differently, Hawaiians’ insistence on their rights to sovereignty and decision-making about their language, education, land use, and more is ongoing.

So there is no need for me to politicize cultural production about and in Hawai‘i: the colonization of Hawai‘i does it for me. The effects of both colonialism and colonality are evident to me everyday in and out of the classroom. As a scholar, recognizing their marks on the representation of Hawaiian culture has meant, for instance, noticing that, while paperback editions of post-annexation English-language collections of Hawai‘i legends remain steadily popular, there was no substantive study of these publications taking a historicizing and critical approach. Why? To take on this project, which I did over ten years ago, required me to self-identify as a settler, but also to do so in an engaged rather than guilt-ridden way.

I say this because guilt can be paralyzing, but at least in my experience as a teacher and scholar, taking responsibility for change has not been so—and that is part of what I want to communicate to those who, myself included, may feel unsettled by the realization that we are settlers and/or we have in a range of ways been in complicity with colonial power structures. I think again of Cruikshank, a settler in a very different place, writing about “the sedimentation of colonialist categories in much contemporary scholarship: what sinks into history and what floats away is not random” (151).

Ramón Saldívar—who was one of the speakers at the important panels of the 2008 American Folklore Society meeting marking the 50th anniversary of Américo Paredes’s *With His Pistol in His Hand*—has written: “Fifty years before the current focus on the issue of coloniality and its relationship to history, power, knowledge, and subaltern modernities, before our focus on processes of globalization and the transnational nature of economic and social forms, and before the related questions of imagined communities and the transnational imaginary, Américo Paredes addresses these same issues of the coloniality of knowledge in the context of border modernities” (55). Some argue that this is why Paredes has been erased from the genealogy of folkloristics. But there are multiple genealogies, and we play a part in retracing and performing them.

Not surprisingly, several of the discussions that took place during our “Folktales and Fairy Tales: Translation, Colonialism, and Cinema” symposium led to questions of ownership and ethical responsibility, competing truths and expectations of authenticity, universalism and hegemony, the relationship between performance and master-narratives, memory and history, emplaced culture and language-culture. The conversations that the symposium initiated are continuing in various formats, formally and informally. Films

like Vilsoni Hereniko's *The Land Has Eyes* and David Kaplan's *Red Riding Hood* have crossed audiences and moved them in unexpected ways. Waziyatawin's multi-media performance of oral and visual history in today's struggles of the displaced Dakota people in the face of Minnesota's 150 years of statehood prompted both activism and reflection in light of Hawai'i upcoming 50th anniversary. For me, as a scholar and person, it was a difficult conversation, not a dialog conducted in the middle ground, but a disorienting experience of tensions. I came away with ku'u aloha ho'omanawanui's comment on how the Disneyfication or appropriation of indigenous cultures means that a lot of "unteaching" must take place before "teaching" is possible; with John Zuern's firm reminder of the incommensurability of the de-colonizing and de-Disneyfying projects; with students' excited realization that folklore matters in more ways than one; and with further commitment to reflect on the politics of wonder today.

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