path of colored fabrics was stretched around the fire. Then Michael Mel stepped onto it and began his magic. As if coming full circle with the first dancers, Mel slowly paddled an imaginary canoe into the space. His solitary figure then enacted the crushing challenges to PNG traditions and yet somehow his performance spoke for all indigenous peoples. In the end he made the audience face their own stereotypes, encouraging enlightenment and change.

Made possible by generous contributions from the Pacific Peoples’ Partnership and the Christensen Fund, “Hailans to Ailans” deserved to appear in more venues before it was done.

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American Aloha explores the politics and poetics of cultural production through a detailed account of the making of the Hawai’i program for the 1989 Smithsonian Folklife Festival (SFF). Interlinking archival sources, conversations, interviews, and documents saved by program organizers, the author, Heather A Diamond, presents a critical, multi-vocal case study that explores tradition, representation, cultural commodification, identity, tourism, sovereignty, and nationalism through the processes and outcomes of culture brokering for public consumption. Although she was not present during the actual planning and execution of the festival, Diamond capitalizes successfully on her outsider position to analyze data from multiple viewpoints. The resulting text is a nuanced analysis of the meaning and purpose of folklife festivals that simultaneously examines the complexities of Hawaiian identity as it is naturalized, romanticized, and politicized by those who have it, don’t have it, or fit somewhere in between.

The themes presented in American Aloha begin from the premise that, from beginning to end, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival is shaped by contradictions between the ideologies and practices. The annual festival promotes postmodern liberal values of difference, yet it is part of a legacy of exhibiting peoples along a continuum of savagery to civilization to justify assimilationist policies of the past. With the intent of bringing the periphery to the core, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival showcases cultures as destinations hosted by local culture brokers, but Hawai’i cannot literally be toured on the Mall in Washington DC. The program is designed to display the cultural diversity of America under a national model of multiculturalism, but for the 1989 festival organizers hand selected culture brokers they deemed “representative” through ethnographic practices that constructed artificial ethnicities for display and denied complex identity politics that could have subverted naturalized power structures between mainland
festival organizers and Hawaiian culture brokers. At the festival, organizers encouraged informal exchange between participants and visitors, yet the program was formalized through interpretive signs and unwritten formal rules of intercultural dialogue. In a final ironic turn, the program itself had to be changed to fit a local context when it was repackaged and staged “at home” in Hawai‘i.

Diamond takes the readers on a journey from Hawai‘i to Washington DC and back again as she traces the politics of representing Hawaiian identities in chronological order. She begins with the opening ceremony, positioning the Smithsonian’s choice to highlight Hawai‘i as a “cultural hotspot” with a long history of institutional intervention—governmental, religious, academic, and private—in which traditions are appropriated, manipulated, and contested for political and economic gain. For those whose traditions are at stake, these processes have resulted in loss of lands, lifeways, and control in battles over sovereignty and statehood. Chapter 1 traces the political history of these interventions from first contact, to the rise of international exhibitions around the turn of the twentieth century, statehood, the national civil rights movement, and the selection of Hawai‘i for exhibition at the 1989 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, whose organizers made a conscious effort to reimagine an “authentic” Hawai‘i beyond a touristic paradigm. This chapter illustrates that for Native Hawaiians and other groups of marginalized peoples, control over the practice and representation of traditions is linked to power and authority. Chapter 2 expands this idea, illustrating the disjuncture between local and US continental visions of Hawai‘i’s people and their traditions through the ethnographic process in which locally hired fieldworkers were required to interview and select participants based on notions of tradition as defined by professionally trained Smithsonian staff. Complex ethnicities oscillated among local, statewide, and national categories as ethnic groups, themes, material culture, and people were selected to represent an image of Hawai‘i alternative to what the mainstream United States consumes in the media and through tourism, and the program was shaped to fit within a historical master narrative for the SFF exhibition.

With content and performers selected, Diamond takes the readers to Washington DC, to experience the process by which SFF staff constructed the physical and ideological space for the Hawai‘i program. In shaping an “authentic” Hawai‘i for display, staff deliberately avoided reference to commercialized aspects of traditional folklore. Ironically, these mediations ignored the role of tourism and the marketplace in shaping today’s folklife, rendering only roots traditions authentic and denying performers a contemporary identity in which folkways reflect an active, contemporary engagement within a global economy. By packaging performers into genres that deny engagement with modernity and erase issues of historical and current injustices, the SFF program can easily be read by Hawaiian nationalists as a form of neocolonialism. Moreover, the practical issues of mapping and constructing the physical
space for the festival presented numerous problems in regard to dividing ethnic groups spatially while eliciting hybridity. In the end, the demarcated spaces of the Hawai‘i portion of the Mall did not correspond to Hawai‘i’s reality but rather became a festival ground that valorized Native Hawaiians as hosts (with the most space) alongside selected other ethnic groups, while excluding the hegemonic influence of Hawai‘i’s dominant American and Japanese communities.

Once the festival began, hosts (festival performers) and guests (festival visitors) were invited to co-create “spontaneous” interaction, but this interaction was mediated by the physical space of the exhibit, audience expectations, and performers’ awareness of their roles as official culture bearers. Diamond analyzes stories and anecdotes from the festival, presenting it as a site of contested and negotiated identity in which participants generally enacted an artificial, racially determined paradigm of multiculturalism onstage, while practicing more fluid ethnic identities backstage. In many of these cases the presence of others stymied the “authenticity” that festival planners hoped that culture bearers would present on stage; instead, the performers reacted to the presence of academics, guest speakers, and audiences by self-editing and going into performance mode among other mediated modes of behavior. “What these anecdotes suggest,” Diamond states, “is that for all its seeming informality and invitation to speak freely, in fact, limitations of time, assigned topics, cultural constraints, and a heightened sense of place and occasion made in-depth discussion of controversial topics highly unlikely” (165).

The book ends with a discussion of the festival’s aftermath, exploring whether the Smithsonian’s intervention had any impact on the pervasive tendency of the tourist economy to shape and present stereotypical images of Hawai‘i and its inhabitants to the world. The author argues that the festival did in fact shape local identity politics by selecting some individuals over others as culture bearers and by hierarchically ordering folk culture for display, documentation, and eventually archiving once those who remember the event are gone. Among more provocative outcomes of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival were the tendency of festival participants to recreate the Smithsonian’s folklife model back at home, and the aftermath of the interpersonal relationships made. The author closes with a discussion of cultural appropriation, colonization, resistance, sovereignty, and empowerment—all critical issues that define the Hawaiian experience—and links them to broader themes in American and Indigenous studies. American Aloha will interest a broad readership interested in Hawaiian culture and history, museums, representation, tourism, and the construction of nationalism. Diamond’s skill at weaving theoretical themes with detailed data and anecdotes makes the book read like a collection of personal memories and characters with whom the reader can identify.

ALEXIS CELESTE BUN TEN
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