

Book and Media Reviews

Pacific Performances: Theatricality and Cross-Cultural Encounter in the South Seas, by Christopher B Balme. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. ISBN 978-1-4039-8598-9, xiv + 256 pages, figures, illustrations, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$80.00.

In *Pacific Performances: Theatricality and Cross-Cultural Encounter in the South Seas*, theater historian and theorist Christopher B Balme offers not just an investigation of theatrical events depicting colonial encounters, but also a wider paradigm of the theatricality of cultural encounters in colonial contexts more broadly. This approach offers a useful intervention in and addition to scholarship in colonial and postcolonial studies, Pacific studies, history, and anthropology.

Arguing that “cross-cultural contacts were theatrical as much as they were economic, sexual or political,” Balme says that “much took place, and still does, in modes that we generally subsume under the term ‘performance’” (xii). Noting the ways that performances, such as music and dance, have figured centrally in colonial encounters, tourism, and post-colonial movements, he urges us, as scholars, to more actively engage these dimensions of history.

While it is certainly true that more scholarship examining the intersection of theater and colonialism in the Pacific is overdue, Balme’s larger contribution lies in his proposal that “theatricality, or the discursive practice of theatricalizing other peoples and places,” was a necessary prerequisite for later colonial enterprises. In the Pacific, such an approach is

especially useful, he argues, because of “remarkably persistent and recurring patterns of perception and representation” by colonizers of indigenous peoples (xii–xiii). In short, beyond urging more academic attention to the performing arts, he provides a different paradigm for investigating colonial relations, one that recognizes the self-conscious manipulation of representations by both colonizers and colonized in an active contestation over the deployment of meanings.

Starting with an oft-told moment of Dutch navigator Abel Tasman’s encounter with indigenous Māori inhabitants in Aotearoa, Balme notes the importance of performative exchanges. In European reports of the voyage, some Māori responded to the arrival of Tasman’s ship in their harbor with “sounds like . . . Trumpets,” no doubt blowing on shells (20). Probably misinterpreting this as a welcome, not a warning, Tasman instructed his sailors to mimic the sound, trumpeting back on a horn. By mobilizing a sound-gesture in one cultural system that meant nearly the opposite in the other, Tasman set the stage for a climate of mistrust that ultimately resulted in violence when the Māori attacked. Balme’s example demonstrates the performative nature of such first encounters where both sides, presumably, struggled with the incomprehensibility of the other’s sign systems.

While stressing the fundamental theatricality of these encounters (ie, two sets of actors and two sets of spectators), Balme never forgets the deadly histories of decimation and dispossession that ultimately accompanied European expansion into the

Pacific. In proposing the theatricality of colonial encounters, Balme does so not to reduce these relations to mere dramatic incidents, but rather to employ an analysis that illuminates the ways in which the inherent performativity of such encounters was an integral part of colonialism's operations.

Growing up in New Zealand, and spending his academic career in Germany, Balme is sensitive to the issues framing investigations of colonial relations in postcolonial times, including the challenges of archival research in repositories that have historically documented primarily the European point of view through colonial reports and mercantile records, as well as visual representations such as old paintings, lithographs, and photographs that were construed through a lens of European visual tropes and modes of interpretation. He notes, too, the difficulty in relying on historical records purporting to convey Native points of view, as with some missionary texts, given that such recordings are always mediated through European frameworks. To further counter these limitations, his historical research might, however, have tried to include notions of Native responses captured in chants and poetry, especially where more and more of that work is becoming available through collaborations/translations between indigenous experts and archives, such as at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu.

Other chapters in the book, arranged roughly chronologically, take up European theater's representations of the Pacific Islands from 1785–1830; the missionaries' influence on the hula and its continuing survival underground during the periods

of repression; the performances by Samoan troupes in Germany during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; hit plays and musicals in the United States, including *Rain*, and *South Pacific* (which depicted Island life only to restage national racial anxieties); the role of theatricality in the playing out of colonial rule through commemorations and ceremonies; and, finally, a consideration of contemporary tourist performance and experimental indigenous theater performances in Hawai'i and Sāmoa.

While the research on theatrical productions as such is useful (especially the original research on German/Samoan colonial relations, and the Germans' positing of the Samoans as Germanic "fellow citizens" [130]), even more striking is Balme's turning of a theatrical eye to the issues of representation and perception by visiting indigenous people to Europe, and by the Europeans who encountered them in the early nineteenth century. For example, Balme considers the ultimately tragic 1824 visit of King Kamehameha II and his favorite wife, the queen consort, to the royal court in London, during which they both succumbed to the measles. [Editor's note: In the book, the queen consort, Kamamalu, is misidentified as Ka'ahumanu (misspelled once as Ka'ahuamanu).] Noting the royal couple's frequent attendance at the theater, Balme also emphasizes the ways in which their public appearances became theatrical events in themselves, disappointing some English onlookers when the king and queen chose to appear in British-style clothing instead of "their native costume" (70). This emphasis on

vision, spectacle, and agential mode of self-presentation outside the limits of (yet in counter-relation to) the historical “ethnographic spectacles” staged in Germany from 1874 until the 1930s lends itself well to Balme’s performative analysis (15, 126–133).

An additional chapter applying these analytic techniques to the current historical period outside the explicitly theatrical mode would have been useful. For example, Balme discusses contemporary indigenous theater and performances in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Sāmoa, and Tonga, including the popular beauty contests staged by transgendered persons (a term that does not fully capture the subtleties of meanings of the Polynesian terms *māhū* and *fa’afafine*). But a similar performative approach to understanding public actions countering colonial legacies could also be illuminating. For example, Balme could have examined events like the “staging” of protests over landownership via sit-ins on contested lands, where the acts of looking and being seen, as well as presenting oneself as physically “present,” are profoundly political actions amenable to a performative type of analysis.

Balme does examine the performance of savvy political resistance in the touristic sphere, specifically as it is enacted at the massively popular destination site of the Polynesian Cultural Center, located on the island of O’ahu in Hawai’i. However, it is all too easy to either simply celebrate or critique the center, with its “villages” representing various Pacific Islands cultures, and the spectacular tourist shows that are held at night. Depending on one’s point of view, the Polynesian Cultural Center can be seen as an educational

institution that helps retain and spread knowledge of traditional indigenous cultural practices, or as a business commercializing and commodifying them for nonindigenous consumption. Balme makes an argument more appropriate to the complexities of the site and especially to the multiple meanings generated and derived by the performers themselves when he analyzes the virtuoso performance of the master of ceremonies (MC), a Samoan chief, in the Samoan village (180–181).

Deftly parodying European historical stereotypes of Pacific Islanders, the MC mobilizes all the tropes of Edenic primitivism his less-informed audiences may bring with them, only to punctuate them with self-reflexive comedic irony: “Every time we [Samoans] cook, we use the ground-oven,” he says, referencing the past ways of life that the center implicitly promotes. “When I back [home] some day,” he says, “I’m going to take a microwave oven” (180). This twist of comedy bursts the bubble of primitivism while simultaneously implicating the audience who might have believed that all Samoans still cook using a “ground oven.” In Balme’s reading of this performer’s ironic monologues, he finds the agency of self-definition coupled with a double-pronged spoof of outsiders’ ignorance, and of the Polynesian Cultural Center’s reliance on representations of cultural traditions, decontextualized as they are from their current status in contemporary Island communities.

While Balme shines in his reading of the postcolonial politics that frame this type of theatrical setting, it is his larger argument about the

performativity of cultural encounters—how groups and individuals render themselves and how they are comprehended by others in contexts replete with colonial legacies—that constitutes his larger contribution to Pacific scholarship.

JANE DESMOND
*University of Illinois,
 Urbana-Champaign*

* * *

Waikīkī: A History of Forgetting and Remembering, by Andrea Feeser and Gaye Chan. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006. ISBN 978-0-8248-2979-7; xi + 188 pages, maps, photographs, historical chronology, glossary, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$29.00.

In *Waikīkī: A History of Forgetting and Remembering*, Andrea Feeser (author) and Gaye Chan (artist and designer) dig deep into the many layers of Waikīkī's history to reveal its extreme transformation from a site that once sustained Native Hawaiian communities and a diverse array of animal and plant wildlife, to a place that has been systematically commercialized and converted into "a paved-over and polluted urban resort" (124). Notably, the book constitutes an outgrowth of the Historic Waikīkī project, a political and social activist enterprise that seeks to examine and critique the impact of the colonial project, capitalist enterprise, and tourism in Hawai'i (see http://www.downwindproductions.com/about_us.html). Importantly, Feeser and Chan actively subvert the popular myth of Waikīkī as a playground

for leisure and pleasure seekers and instead reveal it as a site fraught with tension.

Waikīkī focuses on nine locations in the Waikīkī area—Lē'ahi (Diamond Head), the Ala Wai, Kālia, Kawehewehe, Helumoa, Uluniu, Kaluaokau, and Kāneloa and Kapua. Each location constitutes a chapter that weaves together "the many stories that thread through Waikīkī's past and present" (8), thus enabling a more complex and nuanced reading of the place and the people whose lives have been woven into the fabric of Waikīkī's distant and more recent history. The authors' choice of each location is strategic in that all are associated with the three natural springs that once provided fluid sustenance to the land and its inhabitants—springs that are deeply connected to the meaning of Waikīkī's name: "Place of Spouting Waters." In a unique and creative way, Feeser and Chan use the springs—'Apuakēhau, Pi'inaio, and Ku'ekaunahi—as a salient metaphor for both the land's and the people's suffering and resilience in the wake of colonial imposition. The authors argue that although the flow of the springs has been impeded as a result of the development process, the fact that they periodically resurface through subterranean channels serves as a signal "that Waikīkī's people and places . . . have not been destroyed" (87).

As Feeser and Chan reclaim the memory of Waikīkī's forgotten history through written and visual texts—a history that has in the recent past been submerged under concrete, steel, and tourist advertising—readers are challenged to reconsider their own role in the construction and deconstruction