

“We Are Not What You Think”: Hawaiian Cultural Memory, Group Identity and Resistance in *Hula: A Novel*

Hawai'i, from a mainland perspective – and I include myself here, may be primarily seen as an exotic destination, a place to escape from everyday life and demands. The images of the distinct islands become subsumed by the touristic gaze that often commodifies Hawaiians and their culture. Jasmin 'Iolani Hakes' novel *Hula* counters the mainland perspective with the Hawaiian local perspective, more precisely of the population of Hilo. Hula, as a culmination of song, dance and story-telling that relies on multiple layers to express meaning, is a key component of the traditions of the islands and the protagonists on whose lives the narrative focuses on – and is also aptly named after. The narrative focuses on three generations of the Naupaka family women – Hulali, Laka and Hi'i. The novel employs a collective perspective beyond the characters involved. Importantly, the collective narrator is more than the sum of individual parts, for there are no clear individuals to discern in the “we” of the narrator. The narrator transcends the individual and unites the people with Hilo as a place - a place that constitutes an entity and that roots its inhabitants. The novel's family story is framed by Hawai'i's past and the questions of Hawaiian identity in the past and present of the narrative, as well as the future. I argue that *Hula: A Novel* contributes to the formation of cultural memory by drawing on the traditions of hula performances and story-telling to represent Hawaiian identity, reemphasizing inclusive cultural understandings of Hawaiian identity. Particularly, the impact of the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act (HHCA) of 1920 is addressed in the novel, as it created the census category of “native” Hawaiian, which disrupted

Hawaiian understandings of self and of collective identity. Those who met the criteria established in the HHCA were eligible for leases of land that had been annexed by the US.

My understanding of cultural memory draws on the conceptualization of historian Jan Assmann. Assmann distinguishes between communicative memory and cultural memory as forms of collective memory. Communicative memory encompasses a more limited, generational time frame, whereas cultural memory might be understood as potentially “timeless,” as it encompasses stories, myths, rites, narratives, and other cultural texts and forms of expression to connect past and present. I’m interested in the concept of collective forms of memory here for its potential of “[holding] a mirror to the nation’s harm-doing” (Mukherjee/Salter x). The novel presents marginalized cultural memories, and forces the reader to engage with perspectives that disrupt dominant narratives and expectations, thus reversing roles and forcing readers (*like myself*) into the position of an outsider.

This is established right at the start, as the novel opens with the following passage: “We are not what you think. To you who come on airplanes, who descend upon us, we are invisible as air. We are the `aina and the sum of its parts. Mauka and makai, past and present” (‘Iolani Hakes 1). The use of `aina points to the different conceptualization of the land from a Hawaiian perspective. `Aina translates to earth, land or sea and as a concept represents Hawaiian values and the responsibility to sustain natural resources as caretakers, rather than owners. The language choices (here and throughout the novel) reveal both the inadequacy of the English language to fully encapsulate the experience of the people of Hilo and the pride in Hilo’s linguistic identity. Further, the narrator asserts: “We were here before you came, and will be here when you leave. We are Hilo, one. We are we” (1). The “before you came” in the opening’s immediate context refers to the time before (mass) tourism. Moreover, the “before” can be read to be further invoking the past of the independent Hawaiian Kingdom before US annexation and colonization. The narrator emphasizes that Hawaiian identity is inextricably

ties to the place. The lasting presence is more than a physical, material presence on the island. Despite their “invisibility” to tourists, referred to as the “interrupters” (11), the presence of Hawaiians remained stable and constant through the ties to the land – even in spite of material dispossession.

The narration tracks the Naupaka family from the 1960s to the 1990s. Their story is embedded in the island’s history. Hula has been an integral part of the lives of the Naupaka women, starting with Hulali (as an adjective can translate to sparkling or shining) Naupaka who has acclaimed legendary status in Hilo for her contributions to the local culture, having revitalized hula and its performances. Hulali’s daughter Laka (significantly named after the goddess of hula, even though not addressed in the novel) was expected to follow in her famous mother’s footsteps, and, naturally, to dance hula. As a teenager, she won the prestigious Miss Aloha Hula contest, just like her mother did. The narrative begins, however, upon the return of Laka to Hilo. After winning the contest she had left Hilo to find a job. Laka’s decision to leave was prompted by her pregnancy, and the fact that her child would not “qualify.” It is then that the reader learns about the implications of the blood quantum requirements of the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act. Laka’s child would not meet the requirements of (50%) “Hawaiian blood” that the legislation requires for eligibility to lease or inherit re-designated land. For Hulali, protecting local culture and the integrity of Hilo depends in large parts on ensuring that lands would be retained and passed down from one generation to the next: “‘Gotta have blood’” (227). The legal definition of “native Hawaiians” through the HHCA imposed a designation of identity that forced those affected by these policies to renegotiate their position as Hawaiians, and to deal with the material realities that came with the policy.

The policy is what comes between the family in the novel. Hulali hopes to maintain agency in working within the confines of the legislation, “having blood” therefore becomes a matter of protecting the community. The notion of “having to have blood,” however, is about

“the individualization of particular bodies,” whereas “Hawaiian genealogical practices enlarge the collective and the social” (Kehaulani Kauanui 138). The hope of preserving the material possessions of the community, from Hulali’s perspective, is to maintain a focus on the material advancement of the collective, yet it comes as a compromise excluding individuals from the group that would not be excluded if it were not for the legislation.

Overwhelmed by the pressures of her mother and the community, Laka had decided to leave. After a miscarriage, Laka bonds with her roommate Beatriz, who consoles her. Despite being white and having Portuguese ancestors, Beatriz possesses tremendous knowledge of Hawaiian history, stories, and sacred places on the islands. Then, Beatriz becomes pregnant. After giving birth to a daughter, Beatriz leaves her child behind with Laka. Laka decides to return home to Hilo with the child, naming her Hi’i (meaning to bear or to nurse a child, showing affection). Laka is not able to fully reconcile with Hulali, with Hi’i’s presence only complicating the conflict between them. Growing up, Hi’i is confronted with being hazed and feeling like an outsider because of her light skin. Through learning hula, she hopes to prove herself and her status as a Naupaka, and to win the approval of her grandmother. Hi’i suffers from the constant pressure to prove herself, as the understanding of her position as a Naupaka family member, and as a part of Hilo, is under attack. The central issues that the novel addresses are revealed through the relationships between the characters, with the familial conflicts mirroring the broader social issues. Hi’i leaves for California, attending UCLA. The alienation from her own upbringing results in her complete denial of Hawaiian culture. The definition of “native Hawaiian” established in the HHCA interferes with cultural understandings, affecting the social realities of Hawaiians like Hi’i.

Hi’i learns this through her experience with hula. She hoped that performing hula would help her prove her identity and win over her grandmother. The narrator in the novel underlines the importance of hula in the context of memory: “Before the waves brought Captain Cook and

the disease and death that followed, hula was the keeper of our origin stories. It was our generational memory, our celestial genealogy” (ʻIolani Hakes 59). The passage points to the generational implications of learning hula and the familial legacy. However, the use of the past tense suggests the disruptive nature of a history of US imperialism and dispossession. Laka sought to caution her daughter against becoming too invested in hula. Her own experience taught her that even dancing hula cannot protect from the challenges of navigating cultural and material realities. Laka tells her daughter that “kuleana is more den hula. Dancing not going give us our lands back or protect us” (ʻIolani Hakes 51). The impossibility of proving herself by learning hula results from the interference of the “blood quantum” requirements.

The narrative “we” in the novel does not change, and remains stable throughout the decades that the narrative spans. There are no individual actors, no individual agency within the collective “we.” The collective identity expressed by this “we” is made up of history and memory, of place and story-telling more broadly. “We” serves as the foundation of cultural memory expressed and created through the narrative. Natalya Bekhta argues that collectives can speak with their own voice and form identities that transcend the individual, in that the collective becomes more than merely “I plus somebody” (165). Rather, she asserts, it is a collective subjectivity that leads to an emergent (we-)voice. As a result, we can speak of “We-Narratives” as defined by Bekhta, for such narratives go beyond the mere form of collective first-person plural narrative form. In these cases, the “we” cannot be reduced back to an “I” that could speak on behalf of the group. *Hula* makes use of this narrative strategy to emphasize collective Hawaiian identity. The we-narrator in *Hula* inverts reader expectations in rejecting individualism by privileging the collective. Through the genre of historical fiction, the narrative becomes a source of memory.

The narrative suggests the interconnectedness of individuals and the collective, bound by the island as a place. As a result, the collective narrator transcends personhood,

encapsulating the ties to land and soil, as well as Hawaiians' responsibility to it. The collective's hope for Laka's return to Hilo is described in this way: "We called to her in our dreams. We tugged her na'au, drew her like a magnet. We haunted her brain and barged into her thoughts. Keaukaha [in Hilo] was an inevitability. She needed us as much as we needed her" (232). This passage represents the emphasis of the collective and interdependence valued by the people of Hilo. Potential translations of na'au include "mind", "heart" and "affections" (University of Hawai'i News). The connection that is suggested by the choice of words, and the description of "haunting her brain," transcends direct personal communication. It is not just the inhabitants of Hilo, but the place itself that is speaking, and calling out to Laka. Thus, the narrator does not only transcend the individual, but further transcends personhood to reflect the innate connection between Hawaiians and the islands. This connection comes with a responsibility (kuleana), and the return home becomes inevitable. The inevitability of a return lies in the cultural understanding of responsibility and in privileging the collective over the individual.

The novel's message is clear in that Hawaiians and Hawaiian culture will prevail, for the "roots are too deep to extract. That's the thing about hula. Burn your books, rewrite your history, build walls, plant flags. Hula is written within the swirls of our feet" (377). Independent of the material and political circumstances, identity remains tied to cultural practices that are deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness of Hawaiians. Moreover, hula has a clear function in maintaining these roots, conceptualizing a different Hawai'i – different from the mainland image of the islands. Cultural survival, and upholding group customs and values, is at the root of what constitutes cultural memory. As Jan Assmann suggests, "the disappearance of ethnic groups is not a matter of physical annihilation but of collective and cultural forgetting" (140). In addition to the personal learning experience of reading – and writing about – the novel, *Hula* shows the potential of collective narrators in the formation of cultural memory as

a decolonial strategy. Further, it emphasizes the connections between memory, identity and place.