

Ben Llados

GESM 130g: Section 35441R

Sean Fraga

4/8/24

Pacific Presents

Hawaii: A Portrayal of Paradise

When I was in third grade I went to Hawaii and came back with a shark tooth and a nice bronze tan. I thought that I was so cool because I got this super awesome necklace from Hawaii; I bragged about it to my entire class and wouldn't shut up about it. I fall victim to the stereotype of an American who has idealized the exotic allure of Hawaii. The romanticized perception finds expression through various aspects of American culture: one example is my dad coming home wearing the iconic Aloha shirt. He believes that it's just part of the Hawaiian culture, what he doesn't know is the extremely controversial history behind it. This has been going on for years though. In LIFE Magazine's "Hawaii – Beauty, Wealth, Amiable People" by Ralph Crane, we can see how Hawaii was marketed to Americans in 1959. This source contributes to this idealization by presenting Hawaii as a paradise characterized by exotic patterns, vibrant nature, and unique people. By taking a deeper dive into some of these characterizations, we can see how some of the 'Hawaii staples' have evolved over the years and made their way into Western American culture.

The idealized image of Hawaii as a paradisaical destination has influenced many aspects of American culture, one that is specifically overlooked is how it has shaped beachwear. In LIFE's magazine "Hawaii – Beauty, Wealth, Amiable People" Crane shows multiple photos of

American women wearing dresses, depicting elegance, and Hawaiian women wearing bikinis and skirts. Teresia K. Teaiwa's examination of Pacific cultures in her book "*Bikinis and Other s/ Pacific n/ Oceans*" shows the cultural significance of beachwear, specifically the bikini, to broader narratives of Hawaiian identity. Teaiwa starts this chapter of the book with "What does the work *bikini* evoke for you? A woman in a two-piece bathing suit, or a site for nuclear weapons testing. A bikini-clad woman invigorated by solar radiation, or Bikini Islanders cancer-ridden from nuclear radiation" (Teaiwa, 87). While Crane's photography depicts the bikini as an expression of leisure and recreation through the photos "Tahitian Party" and "Black-Sand Beach." In actuality, the origin of the bikini has a deeply misogynistic history. It all started with the Marshall Islands at Bikini Atoll – a nuclear bombsite active between 1948 and 1958. Teaiwa describes the role the bikini played as a figure on the islands: "The bikini-clad woman is exotic and malleable to the same colonial gaze which coded Bikini Atoll and its Islanders as exotic, malleable and, most of all, dispensable." (Teaiwa, 93). In the context of the role that bikinis play in Hawaiian culture, this narrative that bikinis are used to 'look exotic' completely undermines the original symbol of colonial exploitation. Teaiwa also makes the point that "The appropriation of the name Bikini, a s/pacific site of trauma and dispossession, for a sexy generic bathing suit functions as fetishism." (Teaiwa, 94). This perfectly aligns with how LIFE is selling Hawaii in their article: idealizing the difference in culture, while slowly dispossessing the Native Hawaiians of their land. This reality challenges the superficial depiction of the bikini as a harmless fashion statement and highlights the deeper implications within the context of colonial history.

Another romanticized aspect of the Hawaiian ‘culture’ is the typical Aloha shirt. In “Tahitian Party” Crane pictures photos of an American man wearing a red Aloha-patterned skirt while dancing. As well as that, the women around him are wearing aloha bikinis and skirts. On “For Nibbles From Mullet Off Waikiki Yacht Harbor” we can see a man pictured fishing wearing an Aloha shirt. Both of these are used to market the American man embracing Hawaiian culture, and enjoying the island lifestyle. Roxane Hughes discusses the symbolism of the Aloha shirt in her article “Multicultural or Destitue Hawaii?” and sheds light on how this shirt pattern has become emblematic of Hawaii. What the Hawaiian shirt is supposed to represent is best said by Hughes in the quote: “The aloha spirit that tourism sells on the islands and abroad depicts Hawai’i as a place of multicultural harmony as well as a romanticized paradise on earth.” (Hughes, 281). It highlights the abundance of leisure; the vibrant and exotic nature of Hawaii; and the paradise adorned with lush foliage and colorful flowers. Many people find different meanings in the shirt, “For art director Thomas Steele this shirt stands as a visual symbol of aloha—a “Hawaiian word that extends the warmth, friendliness, and pride of the Hawaiian people to their islands’ visitors”.” (Hughes, 282). This is a massive point of conflict among many Hawaiians though, creating controversy over whether the shirt helps spread a good message or if it is just another example of the US exploiting Hawaii.

While some may see the Aloha shirt as a classic statement of Hawaiian culture, this serves as another example of commercialization taking over Hawaiian culture. One specific example of a Native Hawaiian scholar’s opinion on the matter is quoted in Hughes’ work: “The manufacture and commercialization of this garment tell about the story of the colonizers’ and settlers’ road to success. Used to promote the tourist and Hawaiian garment industries, this popular icon

resonates with what Native Hawaiian scholar and activist Haunani-Kay Trask denounces as “the grotesque commercialization of everything Hawaiian”.” (Hughes, 282). Trask’s perspective highlights the exploitation of Hawaiian cultural symbols. The Aholha shirt, which at one point had cultural significance, has been commodified and mass-produced to cater to tourist markets, stripping it of its authenticity. Hughes also discusses the stripping of the authenticity of the Aloha shirt: “The development of the Hawaiian garment industry also led to the transnationalization of the aloha shirt at the production and consumption levels, although it was sold as a product designed and made in Hawaii to satisfy visitors’ desire of exotic authenticity.” This process not only erases the historical and cultural context of the Aloha shirt but also reinforces the power dynamics of colonialism. In this context, the romanticized portrayal of the Aloha shirt as a symbol of leisure and paradise overlooks the complex realities of the history behind it.

As I said before, third-grade me thought I was so cool coming home looking like a surfer bro with my shark tooth necklace and bronze tan. This idea comes from the commercialization of Hawaiian culture across the American west coast and how Hawaii’s imagery has extended to shape the aesthetic sensibilities of California beach culture. We can see many of the photos taken by Crane depict many of the traditional California stereotypes. Elsa Devienne’s exploration of Los Angeles beach cultures in her work “Spectacular Bodies: Los Angeles Beach Cultures and the Making of the ‘California Look’” expresses how the Hawaiian island lifestyle has influenced the ‘California Aesthetic.’ The most obvious example of this is surfing: “As an ancient Hawaiian practice, surfing’s exotic nature appealed to a primarily white audience. While diving and swimming races could be witnessed in nearby pools and rivers, surfing could only be performed on the breakers, thus turning the beach into a literal scene.” (Devienne, 11). This Hawaiian

practice dominated beaches, but it didn't spread as naturally as people believed. It started with a few Hawaiian swimmers moving to Los Angeles and showcasing their skills along the Los Angeles coastline. Venice and Redondo Beach started to adopt the sport and create surfing competitions. Surfing became a staple of the California coast, bringing along other ideals; the sport became a lifestyle: "As Kristin Lawler has described, his "beach-blond, tousled hair, tan healthy skin [and his] light-colored, baggy, simple clothing," came to epitomize the "relaxed, carefree look that is associated with the beach to this day."" (Devienne, 12). This also started an appreciation for island life, specifically Hawaii. Crane's depiction of fit and tan Hawaiians emphasized the shared ideal of physical vitality and outdoor living. This cultural exchange between Hawaiian and Californian beach cultures has contributed to very similar cultures, creating a trans-Pacific aesthetic.

Looking back on returning from Hawaii in third grade, I would change a few things. Even though I was a child, I wish that I had been educated more on the history of Hawaii, and some of the exploitation that has happened as a result of commercialization. This can be exemplified by two simple garments: the bikini and the Aloha shirt. While they may seem like symbols of Hawaiian culture, it's important to know the real history behind two of the most common items bought on vacation. Additionally, I wish I could go back and understand where that excitement of being a cool surfer with a shark tooth necklace came from. The two cultures of California beaches and Hawaii mixed made me feel like a surfer – something highly important to both cultures. Lastly, I would tell my dad to not buy that Aloha shirt.

Works Cited

Devienne E. Spectacular Bodies: Los Angeles Beach Cultures and the Making of the “California Look” (1900s-1960s). *European journal of American studies*. 2019

https://uosc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USC_INST/273cgt/cdi_doaj_primary_oai_doaj_org_article_a3d96d36cb584d1fb711d5cf90d4dce0

Hughes, Roxane. “Multiculturalism or Destitute Hawai’i? Revisioning the Symbolism of the Aloha Shirt.” In *American Multiculturalism in Context: Views from at Home and Abroad*, edited by Sami Ludwig, 281–300. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017.

<https://learn-us-east-1-prod-fleet02-xythos.content.blackboardcdn.com/5fd94affdac6c/36621547>

“Life.” *Google Books*, Google,

books.google.com/books?id=EFIEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA58&dq=Hawaii%2BBeauty%2C%2BWealth%2C%2BAmiable%2BPeople%2C&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjhn9bJ2KSFAxUkI0QIHRT7DrcQ6AF6BAgGEAI#v=onepage&q=Hawaii%20Beauty%2C%20Wealth%2C%20Amiable%20People%2C&f=false.

Teaiwa TK. bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans. *The Contemporary Pacific*. 1994;6(1):87-109.

https://uosc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USC_INST/273cgt/cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_38633667