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The American Hero in a Hawaiian Myth

Convergence of Cultures in London's "Koolau the Leper"

Morgan Daniels

Jack London's "Koolau the Leper" (1912) tells the story of a leprous Hawaiian who refuses to be relocated to Molokai by the American government. During Koolau's last stand, Koolau keeps the American army at bay despite their superior weaponry. The story ends with Koolau dying from leprosy a free man on Kauai, his island home. Critics have long debated what this story reveals about London's viewpoint on American imperialism and colonialism. Some critics, like Leonard Cassuto, argue this short story "helps to contradict the stereotyped critical view of London's racism" (120). James Slagel validates this viewpoint when he claims that this story shows the "disappearance of the racism" we see in London's earlier works, implying a new respect for native Hawaiians (182). While these scholars view "Koolau the Leper" as a critique of America's imperial reach into Hawaii, others like Ku'ualoha Ho'omanawanui—a Native Hawaiian—argue that London's misrepresentation and fictionalization of Koolau's story shows that London is "one of those racist, usurping *haole* he [London] despises" (238). These insightful interpretations bring depth to our understanding of London's "Koolau the Leper" since they depict London simultaneously as a proponent and an antagonist to American imperialism.

I would like to augment this understanding by suggesting that London's critique of American imperialism is in itself an act of imperialism. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, imperialism can be defined as "the extension and maintenance of a country's power or influence through trade, diplomacy, military, or *cultural dominance*" (italics added). I propose that Jack London's "Koolau the Leper" is an act of cultural dominance as London took the true story of Kaluaiko`olau, a political and cultural hero to native Hawaiians, and altered it in such a way as to present a traditional American hero: independent, rebellious of authority figures, and individualistic. By taking a Hawaiian story and transforming it to fit American sensibilities, London's story becomes an instance of imperialism, a demonstration of America's cultural dominance. London replaces Hawaiian values with American ones when he supplants the real Koolau's story with his fictitious, highly exaggerated one. His fragmentation and reinvention of the real story of Koolau showcases a modernist response to the creolization of differing cultures and values, celebrating the convergence of cultures that occurs through imperialism.

Koolau's physical and cultural rebellion against American authority figures is a quality associated more with the traditional American hero than a Hawaiian hero. London's "Koolau the Leper" begins with Koolau giving a rousing speech to his fellow Hansen-diseased outcasts, railing on the injustices done by the American government and encouraging them to defy the soldiers that demand their removal. In his speech, Koolau proclaims, "Tomorrow the soldiers land on the shore. Let the weak hearts go down to them. . . . As for us we shall stay and fight" (London 42). Koolau's rebellion against the demand of the United States government appears to parallel the American Revolution; the Patriots rejected established prejudices and the expectations of Great Britain, and they fought to create an entirely new government than the one that ruled from an ocean away. Koolau rebels on an individual level to the demands of a foreign government, rejecting their authority to exile him to Molokai and claiming his right for independent rule. Both traditional American Patriots and Koolau are willing to fight for their independence. Regala Fuchs claims that the archetypal hero of the American frontier is "the social outlaw who fought against injustice located often in powerful institutions" (37). Koolau's outlaw status and retreat into the wild, untamed—and for the majority inaccessible—outreaches of Kauai also

place Koolau on par with the American frontier legend. London creates a character that exemplifies the qualities held by the iconic American frontiersmen and patriot. Koolau's actions do not resemble those of our Hawaiian example: Queen Liliuokalani. She abdicated her throne to the United States government in order to save her people from violence and bloodshed (Liliuokalani 274). Rather than rebelling against American intrusion, Queen Liliuokalani conceded to it.

In London's depiction of Koolau, Koolau's focus on his individual freedom rather than the community is also associated more with Western values than those of Hawaii. When a blue-eyed American captain demands Koolau turn himself in, Koolau responds fervently, "*I am a free man . . . I have lived free and I shall die free. I will never give myself up*" (London 53, italics added). While Koolau's yearning for freedom is not unique to an American, his focus on his own individuality reflects more American values than the community valued by Hawaiians. According to Robert Sayre, Americans "think of themselves as having great respect for the uniqueness of the individual" and it is one of the traits most associated with the Western mindset (9). When the rest of the leper outcasts turn themselves in, Koolau chooses to remain outside the community, earning "imprecations and insults" for his desertion (London 53). In Hawaii, one of the most important values of their culture is that of *obana*, which literally translates to "family" in English but is connotatively associated with so much more than that in Hawaii. John McDermott describes the importance of *obana* to native Hawaiians by saying, "the concept of *obana* binds a group together, and in the group is to be found the strength and purpose and meaning of existence" (12). By choosing to protect his individual rights and remain outside of the group, Koolau rejects *obana* and adopts a new Western-based meaning for existence.

Jack London paints Koolau as the archetypal hero of the American West, further appropriating this Hawaiian into the fabric of American legends. During the late half of the nineteenth century, stories that are set in the American Wild West and that feature a nomadic cowboy or outlaw grew in popularity due to infamous outlaws like Bill Pickett, Jesse James, and Billy the Kid. It is during this period that Koolau's story begins. In London's "Koolau the Leper," Koolau is a cowboy before he is forced to flee in order to avoid exile to Molokai. As Koolau is dying, he is taken back to his cowboy days where he is once more "in the thick of the horse-breaking,

with raw colts rearing and bucking under him,” and in another instance he is “pursuing the wild bulls of the upland pastures” (55). It is significant that the nostalgia that overcomes London’s Koolau is for his cowboy days, days that were spent conquering the wild and the untamed. Memories of family or friends do not traipse across his reminiscences. Koolau finds comfort in moments that exemplify his youthful vigor and strength. The cowboy of myth is “defined by his strength, honor, independence, and his wilderness identity...He emerges from the wilderness a free and equal individual” (Wright 6). Koolau, cowboy and outlaw, exemplifies the American values of strength, independence, and individuality.

In contrast to London’s short story, the Hawaiian version of “Koolau the Leper” depicts a different set of values: community, family, and Christianity. In Pi’ilani’s autobiographical account we discover that the reason they refused to go to Molokai was Pi’ilani’s and Koolau’s belief that their wedding vows would be broken if they were to separate before death. Pi’ilani recalls, “And we agreed together to live patiently together in the hardships of this life, and that only death would separate us” (8). Koolau was willing to go to Molokai, until he realized that his family would not be able to accompany him. Koolau’s focus was not protecting his individual freedoms, as postulated by Jack London, but to remain a part of his familial community. According to his wife, Koolau’s refusal was based on his desire to be a good Christian. His story, according to Ku’ualoha Ho’omanawanui, is not the story of a rebellious cowboy but the story of “a courageous Christian family man who stands by his principles, a Hawaiian ‘David’ fighting the American ‘Goliath’ (253). While both London’s and Pi’ilani’s accounts portrays Koolau as an underdog who refuses to submit, their accounts reveal different motivations behind Koolau’s actions. James Slagel claims that the story of Koolau is “a love story, tragic and true” (182) and yet in London’s “Koolau the Leper,” there is no mention of family members and not the slightest allusion to Christianity. London replaced the qualities of Koolau that made him a Hawaiian hero with ones that were more sympathetic to American sensibilities.

Koolau’s relationship with his gun is one example of the different cultural values emphasized in London’s and Pi’ilani’s stories and demonstrates America’s encroachment on a Hawaiian story. In London’s story, Koolau’s Mauser is the one thing in his life that never failed Koolau,

and he dies with his gun “pressed against his chest with his folded fingerless hands” (55). He holds his gun as if it was something precious, something close to his heart. The Mauser is a symbol of rebellion and of his fight for freedom; his gun is the reason Koolau could die a free man. In essence, the gun allows him to protect the American values he treasures. The relationship between Koolau and his gun is portrayed differently in Pi’ilani’s account. When Koolau realizes he is dying, he instructs his wife to bury the gun with him stating: “because you had nothing to do with the gun. I alone used it and when I go, we go together; when my work is done, its work in this world is done” (36). Pi’ilani saw this moment as an act of love. By taking the gun with him, Koolau was accepting total blame for the trouble he caused (Slagel 183). The gun was a symbol of his love and desire to protect his family, even at his death. The two accounts demonstrate the different motivations behind the character, Koolau, and correspond to the different heroes portrayed in the story: American and Hawaiian.

By portraying Koolau as an American hero, London undermines the current opinion most Americans had of Hawaiians. Leprosy, in a Christian Hawaii, carried a social stigma, since the Bible declares those who have leprosy are unclean. Due to this stigma and Hawaiians’ genetic proclivity to suffer from leprosy, Hawaiians were considered “savage, immoral, promiscuous, undisciplined, stupid and inferior, in need of guidance from the ‘great white father’” (Ho’omanawanui, 235). By portraying Koolau as a renegade who not only rebels against the American government but successfully withstood their mortar shells, guns, and superior numbers, London creates a character who defies negative stigmas toward Hawaiians. Koolau is proud that despite being “a crippled wreck of a man” the American army still needed “guns and rifles, police and soldiers” in order to capture him (London 50). Due to America’s underdog status during the American Revolution, Americans hold a certain level of empathy toward other unlikely conquerors, and Koolau’s story resonates with them. London tied qualities that Americans value to a leprous ‘other,’ implying that Koolau—a leper and a Hawaiian—can still be an American hero.

Pi’ilani’s autobiographical account cedes to London’s fictional story, reflecting the appropriation of culture that occurred throughout the colonization of Hawaii. According to Susan Stanford Friedman, this hybridity between cultures is a result of modernity (479). Due to the technological advances in the communication systems and transportation

of our modern world, nations and cultures that before had remained isolated start to interact with other cultures; some even adopt the practices of foreign nations. Jack London's "Koolau the Leper" is a result of these interactions. The convergence between a Hawaiian legend and American ideologies created something entirely new. In many ways, London's adoption of a foreign tale is not wholly an American practice, but a Hawaiian one as well. In Liliuokalani's *Hawaii's Story*, she describes in great detail the common adoption practice in Hawaii where babies immediately after birth are given to another chief to be raised as their own. Liliuokalani cited that the reason for this practice was to "cement the ties of friendship between the chiefs ... and it has doubtless fostered a community of interest and harmony" (4). Could we not read London's "Koolau the Leper" in the same way? While the story of Koolau is one born of Hawaii, London adopted it and raised it in the American way. Belonging to both cultures, "Koolau the Leper" can be a unifying force, fostering a community of interest and harmony through the timeless and universal practice of storytelling. "Koolau the Leper" is an example of what Friedman calls "creolization" defining it as a merging of cultures through "patterns of imitation, adaptation, transculturation, and cultural translation" (483). Perhaps according to Friedman's definition, London's story does not have to be either an American story or a Hawaiian one: "Koolau the Leper" can be both and belong to both cultures. When Koolau admires the Americans for "that will in them that was stronger than life and that bent all things to their bidding," he failed to recognize that he, too, had the same quality, as he continued on even as his body and community failed him. Koolau does not recognize the American qualities he possesses. If literature is a reaction to the modernity that surrounds us, then "Koolau the Leper" suggests that Hawaii, even in the early twentieth century is no longer strictly Hawaiian, nor is it wholly absorbed by America.

This intermeshing of traditional myths and legends between cultures is prevalent today, and due to America's media dominance, American ideals often overshadow other cultural stories and values. In 2016, Disney released a new animated movie, *Moana*, which features the Polynesian demigod, Māui, and Moana, the daughter and heir of a chief, whose quest is to return Te Fiti's heart to its island. The character Māui is loosely based on the cultural hero and trickster found in Hawaiian mythology.

According to legends, Māui “fished up from the ocean New Zealand and the Hawaiian Islands with a magic hook” (Westervelt 18). He is also credited for lassooing the sun, finding fire, and making the earth a habitable environment for humankind. This trickster is well beloved by many of Polynesian descent, and some worried that the portrayal of a Polynesian legend from such a huge American conglomerate like the Walt Disney Company would misrepresent their cultural myth. With that in mind, Disney created the Oceanic Story Trust, a group of anthropologists, historians, and linguists from the Polynesian islands whose mission was to keep the integrity of the original Polynesian legend (Ito). Included in the Trust was the tattoo artist Su’a Peter Sulu’ape, “a sixth-generation master tattooist” who “checked every mark and pattern” of Māui’s tattoos, as well as fisherman in Fiji whose input helped make the boat and ropes historically and culturally accurate. Despite Disney’s in-depth research into Polynesian culture and myths, Disney still received backlash about the size of Māui, of whom Lawrence Downes from *The New York Times*, described as a “heavily inked muscleman pumped to what, in a tire, would be a dangerously high p.s.i.” Despite this critique, Caitlin Moore from *The Washington Post* claims that *Moana* is Disney’s “most culturally sensitive film ever.” Disney’s attempts to be culturally sensitive in their portrayal of a Polynesian princess demonstrate America’s effort to recognize the greatness of other cultures.

Disney’s cultural sensitivity indicates a shift from the creative license taken in Jack London’s “Koolau the Leper,” while still demonstrating the expansion of American influence into other cultures. While London created an American hero from a Hawaiian legend, Disney created from a Polynesian myth a new hero, one who depicts qualities from both American and Polynesian cultures. Māui’s dedication to mankind, his human *ohana*, as well as his determination to save Moana show the Polynesian values of community and family. His excessive pride in his personal accomplishments—all of which have been memorialized as tattoos on his skin—reflects the American focus on individualism. According to John McDermott, in Polynesia “individuals are discouraged from making public displays to seek recognition for self” and “to flaunt and publicly announce one’s credentials” is a uniquely Western mindset (14). This creolization of different cultural values enhances a nation’s identity, broadening it through the inclusion of another’s myths and legends.

Through London's "Koolau the Leper" and Disney's *Moana*, we can see that America's cultural appropriation celebrates the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations due to modern globalization. London's Koolau exemplifies the American hero of the West and of the Frontier; this hero was created from a leprosy-stricken Hawaiian, shifting America's political paradigm and broadening the definition of an American hero to someone historically considered an undesirable foreign "other." "Koolau the Leper" and *Moana* are examples of American imperialism through cultural dominance, and yet this cultural intermeshing often leads to a greater understanding and respect for other nations, their cultures and their traditions.

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