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The Ukulele: A Right Not Quite Right

Haunani-Kay Trask's article "Hawaiian Rights and Human Right," published in her book *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i* (1993) summarizes the history of Hawai'i and The United States, emphasizing the impact of colonialism and critiquing the application, or lack thereof, of laws and protections for Hawai'i's indigenous community. She defines modern Hawai'i as a "settler society" (25) which, according to Trask, is characteristically dominated and exploited by the larger more powerful colonizing nation. More specifically, Trask concludes that Hawai'i is a colony of The United States of America who is murdering, suppressing, and marginalizing the indigenous culture and people of the islands. Critics find that Trask is rather simplistic and harsh in her examination of Hawaiian and American relations. Anthony Carrigan considers Trask's position to be "damning appraisal" (1) while Jon Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio, of Portuguese descent, calls the author specifically "outspoken and fiery" (256) in her attempts to assuage continued colonialism and oppression of Hawaiian indigenous peoples. Critics agree that Trask is openly prejudiced and highly degrading of Western lifestyles. In her review of *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*, Françoise Douaire-Marsaudon calls Trask a "reductionist" because of her "simplified analysis" of "the notion of culture [where] Native Hawai'ian culture is deemed essentially 'good' while its Western counterpart is demonised." (131); criticizing the extremeness of Trask's definitions and examination. Whereas Trask's article is straight-forward, just like all of her

arguments against colonialism and supporting indigenous rights, there are significant holes in her analysis. One hole in particular which this paper will discuss is the influence of smaller cultures, more specifically the Portuguese immigrants from Madeira, on the Hawaiian culture. Trask asserts that “colonialism has, as one of its goals, the obliteration rather than the incorporation of indigenous peoples” (26); however, she fails to acknowledge the indigenous peoples’ own incorporation of other cultures as a form of self-inflicted obliteration.

The ukulele, which many people associate with Hawaiians and “which has been carried far by tourists under the impression that it is an instrument of native invention, or if not that, an instrument invented in the islands” (Tranquada and King 5), was brought to Hawaii by Portuguese immigrants from the island of Madeira in 1879. The small four stringed instrument has a vast history in America and in other countries, where it has become an iconic symbol of Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander nations. Is this part of the “planned disappearance” (26) Trask so vehemently despises? She argues that the blame falls solely on outsiders and people from the colonizing nation, but she fails to include the Hawaiian people’s acceptance and incorporation of other cultures as part of this “obliteration” process. Trask claims that “colonialism...is an extermination not a recognition of aboriginal people” (25) and their culture. I argue, that while colonialism can overpower a nation’s indigenous culture, those members of said culture share a responsibility in its displacement. Modern Americans recognize and even celebrate the ukulele as a classic indigenous Hawaiian instrument, but the ukulele did not originate in Hawaii. Trask claims that America negatively affected the culture of indigenous Hawaiians, yet overlooks the fact that these same native Hawaiians accepted a part of another culture, specifically the ukulele, with consequences similar to the colonialism from The United States of America, in allowing the ukulele to be mistaken for their own traditional practice.

According to Trask, the “Indigenous peoples ... [are the] collective aboriginal occupation prior to colonial settlement. They are not to be confused with minorities or ethnic groups within the states.” (33). Therefore, the native Hawaiians are indigenous. However, even though before The United States annexed Hawai’i, while the islands were known as the Kingdom of Hawai’i, the Portuguese immigrants on the island making contributions through contractual labor in the sugar cane fields are not considered indigenous to Hawai’i. They were not part of “the first nation of Hawai’i” (Trask 39) however, their influence on Hawai’i’s culture is seen today. Any affect that their appearance made was accepted by the Hawai’ian people. Portuguese immigrants showed a willingness to adapt to other cultures, including Hawaiian, by “disband[ing] as a nationality group, settl[ing] apart from one another...” (Williams 56), however, their culture still infiltrated that of the native Hawai’ian’s. This paper is not disputing the claim that “Unlike settlers in Hawai’i... who voluntarily gave up the nationality of their homeland when they became permanent residents of Hawai’i, Hawaiians had their nationality forcibly changed in their homeland.” (Trask 30). However, there is importance found in the incorporation of additional cultures. The ukulele is one example of a small and insignificant part of a one culture making a significant and long-lasting impact on another.

Jack London, a novelist who traveled to Hawaii, and visited for several months in 1907 “wrote in *The Cruise of the Snark* that ukulele ‘is the Hawaiian [word] for jumping flea as it is also the Hawaiian [word] for a certain musical instrument that may be likened to a young guitar’” (Tranquada and King 43). Ukulele is a Hawaiian word. The Hawaiians adapted the instrument into their culture and gave it a Hawaiian name, officially accepting it as part of them. Roughly twenty years after its introduction to Hawai’i and acceptance by the King Kalakaua, Ernest Kaai, native born Hawai’ian became a prolific figure of the ukulele, introducing it to the

world as the Hawaiian guitar when he published “*The Ukulele: A Hawaiian Guitar, and How to Play It...* in Honolulu by Wall, Nichols Co. in 1906.” (Tranquada and King 59). Ernest Kaai was “The son of Simon Kaai—member of the House of Nobles, former minister of the interior and finance for Kalakaua and a staunch royalist...” (Tranquada and King 59). The Kaai family was a prominent name in the Hawaiian Islands; not only were royals incorporating the small instrument into their traditions but other influential figures in society. There were many people from varying backgrounds who chose to adapt the ukulele into their culture. These Hawaiians understood their “... right to special measures of control [including to] develop and protect their sciences, technologies and cultural manifestations, ... oral traditions, literatures, designs and visual and performing arts” (Trask 35); all are reasons that Trask names to defend her exaggerated and oversimplified accusations against The United States. By assimilating the ukulele into their culture, Hawaiians showed that they believed in progression and change in cultural development.

In defining America’s relationship with Hawai’i, Trask summarized the process as a hostile “...invasion, occupation, and takeover...” (27) of the indigenous people, their land, and their culture. However, this process was in fact more gradual than Trask’s simple words imply. First, came traders in the 1820s, interested in the whaling and sugar opportunities, followed by the missionaries wanting to save those who did not know the truth, and lastly military force which took over Hawai’i in 1893 (Pap 73-74). The ukulele was brought to Hawaii as a reminder of home for Portuguese immigrants during this process. After time the instrument became the symbol of Hawaiian music, not the chants which had been part of Hawaiian culture for centuries. To Westerners and even further around the world, the ukulele became just as recognized as the hula, as being part of Hawaiian traditional native practice. America did to Hawaii what the Portuguese ukulele did to the Hawaiian music industry. The ukulele displaced many common

practices of music among the native Hawaiians, and has now become the iconic accompanying instrument for islander music. During this time period, America was making conquests throughout the Pacific, acquiring islands and imposing their form of government. Lanny Thompson points out that for these other islands The United States had two problems: ““First, since people of different cultures inhabited the dependencies, they required political systems different from those of the states ... of the United States. Second, significant cultural difference among the dependencies made any uniform political system unworkable” (24). Thompson explains that The United States had to choose how to best govern each of the different newly conquered islands. According to the world power, annexing Hawaii was the best thing for the islands in relation to their own American modernity, taking into consideration the many other cultures and people that inhabited the islands. The Portuguese were one of these groups. The ukulele in turn, influenced the Hawaiian’s to instead of accept new government rule, accept new rules of music.

Trask cites the International Covenants to support her intentionally insulting thesis, however she quotes the phrase that includes “All peoples have the right [to] freely pursue their ...cultural development” (28). While Hawaiians did not choose the Western lifestyle freely, these same indigenous Hawaiians chose to assimilate the ukulele into their culture. Consequently, choosing to develop their culture in a way that other nations would mistakenly celebrate a foreign instrument as part of Hawai’i’s indigenous legacy. Trask later concludes that “Part III of the declaration states that ‘indigenous peoples have the rights to practice their cultural traditions and customs.’ These include spiritual practices ... oral traditions; and the right to transmit their histories and language.” (34). So while she is using this clause to prove America’s neglect of Hawaiian culture, she is also overlooking the native’s incorporation of the foreign instrument.

A significant reason for Trask's frank hostility towards America is because American and Hawaiian cultures are so inherently different. However Madeiran and Hawaiian cultures are not so different. Trask asserts that "Before the coming of the colonizers, Native society was a familial relationship organized by tribes or chiefdoms in which the necessities of life—land, water, food, collective identity, and support—were available to everyone" (25). The people of the Madeira Island are described similarly as having "family ties and...social obligations as active participants in the god-parentage system" (Williams, "Azorean migration" 146). Each of these cultures shared a similar description of their respective cultures, as well as negative appraisals of their music traditions. "The missionaries' characterization of Hawaiian chant was remarkably similar to British and American tourists' condescending descriptions of Madeiran music" (Tranquada and King 23). A former resident of Hawaii wrote the following about the Portuguese immigrants when considering their importance in the sugar fields:

In my opinion [the Hawaiian] islands could not possibly get a more desirable class of immigrants than the population of the Madeira...Islands. Sober, honest, industrious and peaceable, they combine all the qualities of a good settler and with all this, they are inured to your climate. Their education and ideas of comfort and social requirements are just low enough to make them content with the lot of an isolated settler... (Williams, *And Yet They Come* 53)

While his statement is more positive than those of the missionaries and other British and American tourists, there was still this idea that both Portuguese immigrants and Hawaiian natives were lesser than the American colonizers, which idea Trask deems a "racist argument" (31). The similarities between the cultures made the ukulele not a stark contrast to the already existing culture of the Hawaiians, thus the ukulele was a 'good fit.' Trask overlooks these similarities

between the Hawaiian and Portuguese cultures, and instead chooses to degrade the culture of America, because American culture is a ‘bad fit.’ The aspects of American culture Trask despises relate mostly to capitalism, but had Americans brought a small guitar instead of tourism, Trask’s abhorrence to America would not be as striking.

The modernity that Trask is reacting to is an effect of the history between solely The United States and Hawaii, omitting the many other influences the islands have had over the course of history. Susan Stanford Friedman, on the topic of global modernity explains that certain modernities are “a specific historical development characterized by the rise of the nation-state... and capitalism as developed in the West ... [In short], globalization is the diffusion of Western modernity to the rest of the world” (477). The United States colonized Hawaii and the diffusion of her culture into Hawaii is deplorable to Trask. Friedman also lists the opinion of Walter D. Mignolo who wrote: “There is no modernity without coloniality” (482). Taking this into consideration, without the colonization of Hawaii during the late 1800’s, Trask would not have become a voice for the people of Hawaii. Trask is known to be “An agitator par excellence, [who] gets under the skin of most *haoles* (white people) in Hawaii.” (Barsamian 91). However, without the history, Trask would not have applicable modernist arguments. While Hawaii and The United States have “distinctive modernities, [they are] thoroughly enmeshed, formed through interaction with each other through conquest, or through colonial and postcolonial relations.” (Friedman 382). This same application can be made of the ukulele, or Portuguese, impact of Hawaiian modernity. The world recognizes the ukulele as Hawaiian and therefore accepts it as part of the island culture’s modernity.

The Honolulu Star Adviser, one of Hawaii’s most prominent newspapers, published a story on October 6, 2014 about a Hawaiian man named Shawn Yaca vone who traveled to Japan

for school in the mid'90s. "While studying abroad [he] felt homesick for Hawaii, so he bought a cheap ukulele to remind himself of the islands" (Young 1). Hawaiians, in today's world, even consider this instrument to be part of their idea of home. The ukulele, once a symbol of home for Portuguese immigrants, is now a symbol of home for Hawaiian descendants. Yaca vone is quoted saying "the ukulele created my home away from home, and other international students knew I was from Hawaii because they saw me with the ukulele" (Young 1). The ukulele is such an influential and recognized part of Hawaiian culture that people assume those who have one are Hawaiian. They do not even wonder where the instrument truly originated. The consensus is it must have come from Hawaii, since they are the ones that play it. Making the instrument famous, does not make the Hawaiians its creator just as being in an American tourist in Hawaii makes a person a colonizer. Trask's bases her argument in the awful misappropriation of Hawaiian people and culture done by The United States, however her own people are forgetting their culture and their true roots by considering an addition to be an original. Young, the author of the article also calls the ukulele "Hawaii's trademark string instrument" (1). SO while the world recognizes the ukulele as Hawaiian's iconic instrument. Not only are Americans unaware of the origin of the ukulele but Hawaiians also. Yaca vone also says "so we should all be able to share in treasuring this very special instrument that was invented here in Hawaii." The article was published in order to show case Yaca vone's collection of ukulele's, and is not a history lesson, however, this article teaches its readers that the instrument was created in Hawaii and not on a similar island in the Atlantic Ocean.

Trask sites colonialism as the cause for the loss of her people's culture. The Hawaiian's being forced to accept Christianity, tourism, and American government are her reasons for distress. However, when she claimed that the native Hawaiian's "daily existence in the modern

world is ... best described as a struggle against [their] planned disappearance” (26) she failed to see how their own appropriation of a foreign culture also harms their daily existence. Tourists no longer visit the islands without expecting to see a Hawaiian dressed in native garb and playing the ukulele. On the other hand, Hawaiians no longer leave Hawaii without their reminder of home: the same four string instrument. So while it is true that Trask’s arguments are “so powerful [that they can] change the way you think about Hawaii, and all lands seized by force” (Barsamian 91), her arguments also fail to describe the entire spectrum of cultural conquest. Hawaii is similar to The United States with its extensive list of other cultural influences and peoples living on the island. The Portuguese were not the only people to emigrate to Hawai’i, and therefore, are not the only other small non-colonizing culture to impact the indigenous practice of the Hawaiians. So while America must accept the responsibility of colonialism, Hawaiians, including Trask, need to recognize their own influence on their disappearing indigenous culture.

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