

Through a Distant Lens Visions of Native Hawaiians in Children's Picture Books

BRAVERMAN ESSAY 2012

*“Sovereignty is on the lips of Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian alike. Some utter it with a vengeance, some with hope, some with fear. Sovereignty is no longer just the dream of a few young Hawaiians.”
- Martha H. Noyes (101)*

“We have so much anger and resentment that I don't know that we will ever be satisfied even if they gave it all back.” - Jennifer Gomes, Native Hawaiian (Whitelaw 28)

As I have swum up from the muck of student life and into enlightened librarianship, I have witnessed the many intersections of our profession with social justice issues. Working at inner city libraries, I have seen homelessness, undereducation, crime, and discrimination. Regardless of our backgrounds and socioeconomic stations, though, in the Upper Midwest we share the challenge of the black hole that is January, which sucks you in and threatens never to spit you out again. It is very easy, in such circumstances, to dream of Hawaii¹ in its oversimplified role as a tropical paradise.

But this year, Hawaii stayed on my mind past January, as it dawned on me that I may know some things about the experiences of Native Americans

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whose lives are embedded beside mine in the Upper Midwest, but I knew much less about the lives of Native Hawaiians.² It did not take much work to discover that the history of Native Hawaiians, which was never mentioned in my mainland public schools, is both troublingly similar to and yet quite distinct from that of other Native Americans. While many Native Americans suffer from poverty and poor health, “we elect our leaders and have our own police force and court system,” Debbie Reese says of her continental Native American peoples. Native Hawaiians, on the other hand, “were given the status of perpetual guardianship” by the federal government, says Mililani Trask. “We are not allowed to form governments; we are not allowed to control our land” (32). I was honestly shocked to learn this and began to wonder when and how my own vision of Hawaii began to form. This led me to interrogate how public libraries present the experiences of Native Hawaiians to our youngest citizens. Are the stereotypes I remember from my childhood still being perpetuated? If so, how deep does the discrimination go? And, finally, what can we as librarians do to ameliorate our complicity?

1. Selection and Analysis

At first, I cast a wide net and pulled in everything I could request in children’s literature about Hawaii through my local library system,³ along with a few interlibrary loan items from other library systems within the state. It was important to me to work from materials that are readily available to parents of young children (as opposed to academics) so that my analysis would encompass what local families would be likely to learn. After collecting about fifty books for ages preschool through eight, I began to see a pattern: picture books are the most likely to portray Native Hawaiians and their stories directly. Based on that initial finding, I developed the final criteria that each book must:

- 1) be a picture book that is appropriate for ages four through seven,
- 2) have been published in the last thirty years, and
- 3) purport to depict Native Hawaiians or tell a Native Hawaiian story or folktale.

This selection process left me with eleven books, five of which profess to be Native Hawaiian folktales. Of the remaining books, one is an alphabet book (with fairly complex definitions for each letter), three are stories of contemporary children, and two are historical tales that feature native characters who were invented by the authors. The following analysis of those eleven books interweaves elements of rubrics for analyzing children’s literature from Louise Derman-Sparks, Betsy Hearne, and Mitali Perkins. I will address their questions and suggestions in two main areas: author expertise and sources, and illustrations and story content.

2. Author Expertise and Sources

My concern with authenticity and the right of authors to speak for their subjects begins with determining the authority of the creators of these stories. Derman-Sparks, a professor of human development who has devoted her career to issues of multiculturalism in children's education, suggests that assessing a book's racism includes investigating the author's and illustrator's background and perspective (Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force). Because a typical library user would likely only access the book itself to find out about the author and illustrator, I limited this ranking to the information available in the book and on the book jacket. Table 1 lists the backgrounds of the authors, illustrators, and author-illustrators as described by the books themselves. I graded the entries into four levels, based on the extent of each book's noted connection to Hawaii.

There are some trends worth noting in how this shakes out. For example, the older titles tend to be the ones that lack author/illustrator biographies. However—and perhaps this is a reason why they have lasted so long in the library's circulating collection—they tend to come from Hawaiian publishing houses (University of Hawaii Press; Pacifica Press of Kailua). The two examples from the University of Hawaii Press (*How Maui Slowed the Sun* and *Maui and the Secret of Fire*), both by Suelyn Ching Tune, also each include an author's dedication to those who helped review these traditional tales for accuracy. This hints at a greater attention to and respect for Native storytelling, which, along with the authority of a university press, may explain their persistence in the collection. Unfortunately, the connections to and context of the stories are not made more explicit, which we will see is important in further examining these books.

Another item of note in this survey of basic information is that the only books that do not indicate any connection to Hawaii are the three by author-illustrators. Interestingly, according to "James Rumford's Biography" online, he has lived in Honolulu for thirty years, but for unknown reasons, the publisher chose not to include that information. I was also interested to discover that the three books in Level 3 make no connection between the author and Hawaii but do note that the illustrator has spent time there before creating the book. This could imply that, to publishers at least, the authenticity of visual representation of Hawaii matters more than the voices of its people. And, indeed, the voice of a Native Hawaiian might be heard directly in only one of these books: U'ilani Goldsberry has a Native first name, but neither her book jacket biography nor her online information indicates her heritage. Unfortunately for those of us struggling to learn at a distance, it is not unusual for Native Hawaiians to be absent as authors in print: they come from an oral tradition. As explained by Veronica Ogata, Education Coordinator at Kapi'olani Community College

Level	Book	Author/Illustrator	Location, as indicated on the book (author or illustrator)	Other Hawaii connections, as noted on or in the book
Level 1: Hawaiian author and illustrator	<i>A Is for Aloha</i> (2005)	U'iana Goddessberry (author)	Born on Maui, lives on Oahu	
		Tammy Yee (illustrator)	Born in Honolulu, lives on Oahu	
Level 2: Score information provided on a direct connection to Hawaii	Torch Fishing with the Sun (1999)	Laura E. Williams (author)	Grew up in Hawaii, lives in Cleveland	
		Fabrizio Vandani Boreck (illustrator)	Lives in Mexico	
	<i>How Maui Slowed the Sun</i> (1988)	Suelyn Ching Tane (author)	No information provided	Author acknowledgment lists author/illustrators in Hawaii who have reviewed the book for accuracy; University of Hawaii Press
		Robin Waho Burningsham (illustrator)	No information provided	
	<i>Maui and the Secret of Fire</i> (1991)	Suelyn Ching Tane (author)	No information provided	Author dedication lists author/illustrators in Hawaii who have taught her and reviewed the book for accuracy; University of Hawaii Press
		Robin Waho Burningsham (illustrator)	No information provided	
Level 3: Marginal but noted connections to Hawaii	<i>The Menomonee and the Menom</i> (1984)	Socot Yamashita (author)	No information provided	Book published in Hawaii by local Pacific Press
		Barbara O'Connell (illustrator)	No information provided	
	<i>Dear Kono, The Volcano Is a Girl</i> (1998)	Jean Crisphead George (author)	Lives in New York state	
		Daniel Powers (illustrator)	Lives in New Mexico but received a grant to travel to Hawaii for illustrations	
	<i>The Woman in the Moon</i> (1994)	Jenna Kim Ramirez (author)	Lives in Virginia	
		Carla Golenbe (illustrator)	Lives in Massachusetts but spent several months in Hawaii for this book	
	<i>Grandma Calls Me Beautiful</i> (2008)	Barbara Joosse (author)	Lives in Wisconsin	
		Barbara Lavallee (illustrator)	Lives in Alaska; notes Hawaii "is a favorite destination" (back)	
Level 4: Book does not note any connection to Hawaii	<i>Maui Lullaby</i> (2005)	Erin Erter Kono (author-illustrator)	Lives in mainland USA; listed as flight attendant, implying might have visited Hawaii	[Lives in Hawaii, but this is not on or in the book]
		<i>The Island below the Star</i> (1998)	James Burnford (author-illustrator)	
	<i>Fig-fig- A Treacher Tale From Hawaii</i> (2009)	Gerard McDermott (author-illustrator)	Lives in California	

Table 1: Author-illustrator geography, based on information available on the book itself

in Honolulu, and her colleagues at the University of Hawaii, this “means that much of Hawaiian history and culture is transmitted verbally by respected elders ... through storytelling rather than written records” (Ogata, Sheehey, and Noonan 7). The authenticity of written records that do exist is further called into question by the complex definition of “Native.” Since 1920, in order to be recognized as Native, Hawaiians must demonstrate a 50% blood quantum, as explained by Margaret Jolly, a scholar of Pacific studies (108). However, as reported in the *New York Times*, the 2010 U.S. Census revealed that, Native Hawaiians (alongside Native Americans) are among the mostly likely citizens to report a mixed-race background. In addition, Native Hawaiians have suffered a series of oppressions by the various cultures in Hawaii’s highly diverse population, so their own histories often braid the oppressed with the oppressor. Native activist and Professor of Hawaiian Studies Haunani-Kay Trask explains, “The history of our colonization becomes a twice-told tale, first of discovery and settlement by European and American businessmen and missionaries, then of the plantation Japanese, Chinese, and eventually Filipino rise to dominance in the islands” (“Settlers” 2-3). Given these multiple buffers that distort the voice of the Native, how can we who are non-Native determine the accuracy of stories like the ones presented here?

There is no simple answer to that question, and to move forward with trying to answer it, non-Native librarians need to make a truce with our own uncertainty. Native Hawaiians will always be the experts on their own experience, no matter how much we learn as outsiders, and we need to trust their voices. Information studies professor, scholar of multicultural librarianship, and Anishinaabe tribal member Lorlene Roy has stated firmly that “indigenous people know who they are” (46). Attempts to further explicate “indigenous people” in print have led to a multiplicity of definitions, but what they have in common is that they are all extensions of Roy’s succinct assertion of Native self-definition. What this means is that as non-Native librarians practice collection management, we must explicitly and with self-awareness place the interests of Native Hawaiians, as expressed by Native Hawaiians, ahead of our own perceptions and standards. We do this in order to support Native Hawaiians’ intellectual sovereignty and their right to control the representation of their own culture. Roy and her colleague, Kristen Hogan, rightfully point out that handing over our decision-making power “may spark a feeling of fear of loss of autonomy on the part of librarians” (131). While acknowledging and accepting that caveat, we should be able to refer to and follow the directives of Native Hawaiians when selecting stories about them for our children.

Unfortunately, as exemplified by the books discussed in this paper, the reality of existing materials we have to work with can be much messier than the ideal. One method of working around the lack of direct Native voices, as suggested by children’s literature scholar Betsy Hearne, is assessing the source note provided

by the author or publisher. Suggesting that the ideal note should, at a minimum, “note the name of the teller; the time, place, and circumstances of the telling; and the tone of the occasion” (“Cite the Source” 24), she has created a rubric that categorizes source note information in five levels. Hearne’s rubric is based to some extent on the assertion that “understanding depends less on biology and more on knowledge and experience” (“Respect the Source” 34), which can seem tricky to reconcile with the directive to enable Native Hawaiians to tell their own stories. On closer examination, though, these positions are not mutually exclusive. Trask herself notes that the aforementioned blood quantum is an imposition of the colonial government: “In this way, our nation was divided by race, a concept and reality foreign to our way of thinking” (“Feminism” 907). When people who self-identify as Native Hawaiian may have diverse biological ancestors, we should take into consideration that a well-prepared source note can serve a crucial role in helping those of us outside the culture to understand the story’s place.

Although Hearne’s rubric was created to evaluate sources of traditional tales or folktales, I adapted it in Table 2 to encompass all of these books since they come from outside the realm of experience of most of their authors and therefore should provide context and provenance for the stories. Given that cultural competency and documentation have tended to increase over time, I expected the newer books to score better on this scale, and for the most part, that holds true. The exceptions are *Hula Lullaby*, which has some problems that will be discussed in the upcoming section on illustrations and content; and *The Woman in the Moon*, which in spite of being fifteen years old has the most extensive source note and bibliography and also includes a glossary. When this information is cross-referenced with the information in Table 1, it reveals that

Ranking (Hearne “Cite the Source” 24-25)	Books in this paper
1. <i>The model source note.</i> “The truly exemplary source note cites the specific source(s), adds a description for cultural context, and describes what the author has done to change the tale, with some explanation of why.”	<i>Pig-Boy</i> (2009) <i>The Woman in the Moon</i> (1996)
2. <i>The well-made source note.</i> Specific sources, cleverly integrated and culturally situated.	<i>Grandma Calls Me Beautiful</i> (2008) <i>A is for Aloha</i> (2005)
3. <i>The fine print source note.</i> Source information is included but hidden.	N/A
4. <i>The background-as-source-note.</i> Some cultural information but no citation.	<i>Hula Lullaby</i> (2005) <i>Torch Fishing with the Sun</i> (1999) <i>The Island-below-the-Star</i> (1998)
5. <i>The nonexistent source note.</i> Self-explanatory.	<i>Dear Katie, The Volcano Is a Girl</i> (1998) <i>How Maui Slowed the Sun</i> (1988) <i>Maui and the Secret of Fire</i> (1991) <i>The Menehune and the Nene</i> (1984)

Table 2: Alignment of books with Hearne’s ranking of source notes

the books with better source notes also tend to show some connection, however tenuous, between the author or illustrator and Hawaii. Unfortunately, though, most of these books still fall into the two lowest categories for source notes and author/illustrator connections, so a family who picked them up from the library would not find a verifiable connection to Native Hawaiian life. We will see that this continues to be a problem in the illustrations and content.

3. Illustrations and Story Content

In her recommendations for analyzing children's books for racism and sexism, Derman-Sparks's first suggestion is to look for stereotypes in the illustrations (1). What do people who know little about Native Hawaiians associate with their culture? They may envision flower leis, hula dancing, women in grass skirts with coconut bras — in general, “exotic” women. In his exploration of “the Other” in children's literature, renowned children's literature scholar Perry Nodelman recounts that this feminization is inherent in Orientalism: “Representations of those who can't see or speak for themselves are and must always be engendered by outsiders — those who can see and speak” (29). Although she is primarily referring to white people being portrayed as the highest form of beauty, young adult author Mitali Perkins touches on this as well in her questions for challenging stereotypes in children's books when she asks how beauty is defined in the books (32). The exoticized Native Hawaiian woman represents an appealing but dangerous form of stereotypical beauty.

A glance at the books analyzed in this paper turns up plentiful examples of the exoticized Native. Buxom, flower-swathed women are featured in six of the eleven books (Figures 1-8). These are books for young children, so the desirability of the women is typically shrouded in motherhood and/or deification (Figures 1-6), but it is visible nonetheless. Because of the importance of mothers and the power of goddesses, there are aspects of these images that are positive. However, because these are the only images of Native women we see, they necessarily limit the definition of who a Native Hawaiian woman can be.

The most egregious example is *Hula Lullaby*, which focuses almost entirely on stereotypical, hula-dancing women (Figure 8). Additional problems are raised in *Hula Lullaby* because the author has taken what is a deeply meaningful cultural tradition and flattened it into a children's song. In her introduction, Kono—who is, we recall, white and not from Hawaii—writes, “In Hawai'i the warm breeze often carries the ... rhythmic chants of the hula. It is not difficult to imagine rocking one's child, or *keiki* [keh kee], to sleep to the accompaniment of this gentle cadence” (3). Compare that to the words of Native Hawaiian hula dancer, Momiala Kamahela: “In modern Hawai'i, hula ... has been distorted and commodified for the benefit of the tourist industry ... For those of us who are

practitioners steeped in the ancient form of this Native dance, saying the word 'hula' brings forth an enormous cultural matrix from which this sacred dance emerged, connecting us back to our ancestors" (40). On Hearne's source note scale, Kono scored a four, providing a perfect example of why Hearne scores this type of information so low: "It's important to know about traditions, but that's a background note ... In some ways, it's worse than no note at all because it's deceptive" ("Cite the Source" 24). Just as troubling, though, is that the soothing tone of the story and images will likely continue to appeal to parents and librarians who do not know and may never know why it is inaccurate.

In the five books that feature male heroes, the situation is not much better. Derman-Sparks points out that "for many years, books showed only 'safe' minority heroes — those who avoided serious conflict with the white establishment of their time," and suggests asking, "when minority heroes do appear, are they admired for the same qualities that have made white heroes famous?" (4). In *The Island-below-the-Star*, the answer is yes, such that the heroes are rendered "safe" while simultaneously justifying white colonialism. The story celebrates the discovery of the Hawaiian islands by Polynesians "about 1,500 years ago" (Rumford Afterward). However, this is not a story Native Hawaiians tell about themselves; it is a story white historians have constructed for them, and it is being told by a white man. Rumford depicts happy, dark-skinned men cavorting their way to their new home in Hawaii (Figure 9); this depiction reduces their long journey to a game. What's more, this white man's story creates a role for Natives as a previous generation of colonizers, a mirror and tacit approval of what will happen when white men "discover" the islands.

In addition, because all of the stories featuring male heroes take place in the past or outside of actual history, in most of these books the accomplishments of Native Hawaiians are kept "safe" by the distance of time or imagination. In Figure 10, you can see that the "little people" (the "menehune" of the title) of the story are depicted to look like Natives but with any of their potentially threatening, masculine qualities removed. The only warrior to appear in any of these books, the king in *Pig-Boy*, is not only defeated but is easily conquered by a mere animal (Figure 11). These images take the stories into the realm of "one version of the well-worn 'civilized' Hawaiian: a happy, incompetent child, regardless of chronological age, whose former savagery resulted from superstition and evil chiefs" (Howes 71).

Across all of these stories, regardless of the character's gender, is the aforementioned problem of portraying Native Hawaiians as a people of the past. *A for Aloha*, which has some positive qualities I explore below, undercuts its own accomplishment by defining Native Hawaiians as people of a stone age past (Figure 15) and not as a thriving, contemporary culture. Once again, I turn to Derman-Sparks, who asks us to look at the lifestyles of characters in the



Figure 1: Detail of *Pig-Boy*



Figure 2: Detail of *Grandma
Calls me Beautiful*



Figure 3: Detail of *Dear Katie*

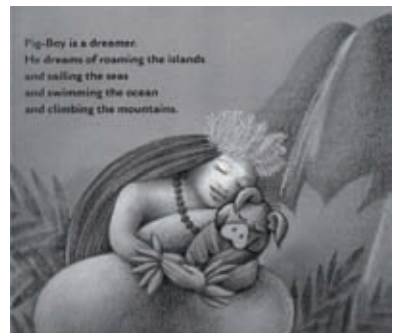


Figure 4: Detail of *Pig-Boy*



Figure 5: Detail of *The Woman in the Moon*



Figure 6: Detail of *Hula Lullaby*



Figure 7: Detail of *A is for Aloha*



Figure 8: Detail of *Hula Lullaby*



Figure 9: Detail of *Island-below-the-Star*



Figure 10: Detail of *The Menehune*

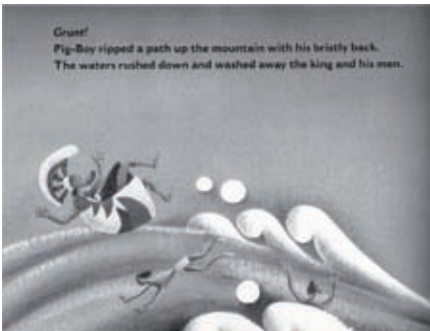


Figure 11: Detail of *Pig-Boy*



Figure 12: Detail of *Torch Fishing with the Sun*



Figure 13: Detail of *Maui and the Secret of Fire*



Figure 14: Detail of *How Maui slowed the Sun*

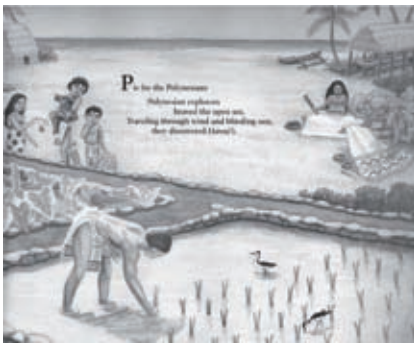


Figure 15: Detail of *A is for Aloha*



Figure 16: Detail of *A is for Aloha*

books: “Are third world persons and their setting depicted in such a way that they contrast unfavorably with the unstated norm of white, middle-class suburbia? ... Watch for instances of the ‘quaint-natives-in-costume’ syndrome” (3). Taken collectively, these books consistently show Native Hawaiians as “quaint natives-in-costume” (Figures 9-15); even a contemporary story like *Grandma Calls Me Beautiful* depicts the family in muumuus and shows flashbacks to a past way of life. This representation of Native culture as historical encourages non-Native children to dismiss it as a relic.

Of all of these books, the only one to show a contemporary, adult male is *A is for Aloha* (Figure 16). The man in this image is of indeterminate or possibly mixed biological heritage, reflecting the reality of Native Hawaiians in the present day. He is clearly graduating from some level of higher education and celebrating Hawaiian-style, with leis and local food. Significantly, the celebration is shared transracially, with affection and joy between this man and children with different shades of hair and skin. This image opens the possibility for discussion —perhaps during library storytime— of what children imagine is happening in the scene, then making the connection between Native and non-Native lives explicit. The picture still is not perfect, in that it could be construed as supporting the problematic “melting pot” trope, but it does offer a the hope of a richer vision of Native Hawaiian life.

4. Recommendations and Conclusion

If so much is wrong with these books, what should be corrected or added to the collection? One important addition would be the inclusion of more books about contemporary Native Hawaiian children and their families. The challenge is not just in finding those books, though, but in empowering writers to produce them. As I mentioned early in this paper, Native Hawaiians are steeped in an oral culture. Stephen Canham, professor of literature at the University of Hawaii, notes, “the art of the story, the impulse to transform life into a story, is central to the inner life of Hawaii. But not necessarily in its written form” (174). If written culture is an imposition —especially if, as Canham also says, English is “viewed, rightly or wrongly, as the colonial language of the upper middle class Caucasian” (174)— what should we do, those of us who are in danger of appearing as colonizers yet again? Throughout this paper, I have tried to be attuned to and encourage awareness of the voices of Native Hawaiians. But, if we are not hearing those voices in the stories we have on hand, we need to seek out Native Hawaiians who are speaking in other forms. Libraries could accomplish this through digital storytelling, internet portals, and/or long-distance collaboration, to name just a few options. In a virtually connected world, we no longer have the luxury of relying on distance as an excuse.

Nevertheless, we who are non-Native should also choose to learn and act locally. While we should be mindful and take care not to group all Native American experiences together, the basic tenets of respect for indigenous autonomy apply across groups and can be practiced with local communities as well. As Roy and Hogan point out, “indigenous peoples can also work with libraries as liaison officers to Native communities” (139), thus providing opportunities for direct contact and collaborative work. Finally, non-Native librarians need to extend the welcome of Native peoples into the library beyond advisory and liaison capacities and into librarianship as a profession. Native Hawaiian librarian Kawika Makanani puts it best when he says of non-Native allies, “It is the responsibility of such selfless individuals to consider that their best work will be to train and prepare native peoples to conduct such work for themselves” (39). Through involvement of local Native peoples in our libraries and advocacy for inclusive outreach to Native Hawaiians and other Native Americans by ALA and other national organizations, we have the power to shape our profession into one where a non-Native librarian will be able to find a Native authority without conducting extensive research. If we respect and amplify the true voices of Native Hawaiians, we might eventually be able to meet and learn from each other as something closer to equals.

122

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NOTES

1. The literature is inconsistent in the spelling of Hawaii (versus Hawai'i). In this paper, I have chosen to use "Hawaii," but when an author has chosen to use "Hawai'i," I have respected and maintained that spelling.
2. I acknowledge that in some communities and schools of thought, "indigenous" is a preferable term to "Native," particularly when used by someone like me who is non-Native. In the particular realm of discussion of Hawaiian issues, though, "Native Hawaiian" seems to be the term most commonly used by both Native and non-Native scholars, so it has been my choice throughout this paper.
3. A major urban/suburban system in the upper Midwest whose name I have redacted from the study.