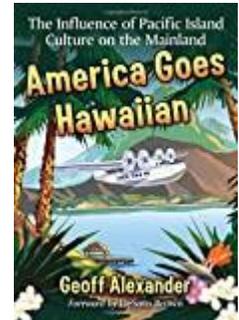


**Geoff Alexander.** *America Goes Hawaiian: The Influence of Pacific Island Culture on the Mainland.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2018. Illustrations. 292 pp. \$49.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4766-6949-6.



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In *America Goes Hawaiian: The Influence of Pacific Island Culture on the Mainland*, Geoff Alexander endeavors to “document” what he “feel[s] to be the most significant Hawaiian and Pacific island contributions to the culture of mainland United States” (p. 16). Among these are surfing and aloha shirts, rattan furniture and hula dancing, steel guitar, and favorable attitudes toward interracial sex and marriage. Most of these contributions, he contends, were a result of World War II and the return of US military personnel from what Alexander calls the “mixed-race fantasyland” in the Pacific (p. 6). His argument centers on the concept of “exotica”: a mixture of “exoticism, primitivism, and—to a degree and with a caveat—orientalism.” Exotica, he argues, “defined Hawaii and the Pacific for ex-GIs, suburban armchair adventurers, and stateside bohemians” during the twentieth century and continues to animate American culture today (p. 9).

The book begins with a foreword by DeSoto Brown, the longtime “gatekeeper of the archives” at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu and author of

multiple books on Hawaiian pop culture, followed by a preface and an introduction by Alexander. The ten chapters and two appendices that comprise the rest of the book each outline different elements of a Pacific cultural force that Alexander argues “exotified” the United States (p. 8). This process is one that Alexander dates to the late eighteenth century with the voyage of James Cook and romantic, gendered, and sexualized portrayals of the Pacific and Pacific islanders by artists like Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) and built on the escapist and colonial stories of writers like Daniel Defoe whose *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) spawned an entire genre of fantastical desert island tales.

Tourism promoters and shipping companies like the Matson Navigation Company added to this perception, which picked up steam after World War II when GIs returned from serving in the Pacific “imbued with the cultural trappings of island groups all over the Pacific” and when air travel (coupled with US statehood) made the islands more accessible to outsiders (p. 17). Those who could not travel to the Hawaiian Islands could ex-

perience the titular “Pacific Island culture” from the comfort of their homes by purchasing a rattan chair (made in the Philippines), slipping on a Hawaiian shirt, and sipping a mai-tai while listening to Martin Denny’s 1956 *Exotica* or, later, watching Bruce Brown’s 1966 *Endless Summer*.

Chapter 1 is concerned with the origins of the idyllic image of the Hawaiian Islands created by writers like Jack London, Mark Twain, and Robert Louis Stevenson, whose stories “whet[ted] Americans’ thirst for the island paradise,” and by visual artists who traveled to the islands by boat (p. 12). By the early twentieth century, shipping and hotel companies were working to promote Hawaii as an exclusive destination for those who could afford it and a reverie for those who could not and had to satiate themselves with framed sheet music covers, menus, and other ephemera depicting Hawaiian beaches and sensuous women. They represented the US territory as an “exotic but still distant Eden” (p. 19).

The remaining chapters focus respectively on hula, Hawaiian and exotica music, tiki culture, rattan furniture, aloha shirts, surfing and surf music, and, finally, what Alexander describes as a “provocative” discussion of “interracial romance” (p. 6). This final chapter focuses mostly on the sex that servicemen had in brothels on O’ahu during the war with women of different races and ethnicities, which he contends, with limited evidence, has led to increased acceptance of interracial marriage and racial understanding in the United States over the subsequent seven decades. Along with the characterization of the Hawaiian Islands as a mixed-race “laboratory” and “fantasyland,” this questionable assertion about interracial relations (which first came to prominence during the 1930s via the work of University of Chicago-trained sociologists like Andrew Lind) and its transferability has been thoroughly critiqued by scholars, including Lori Pierce, Shelly Lee, and Rick Baldoz, for, among other reasons, paying insufficient attention to the power dynamics that

underpinned the American occupation of the Hawaiian Islands and the legacies of the plantation system’s hierarchies (pp. 210, 6).

Alexander writes that the “influential Hawaiian people, causes, art forms, and objects” featured in his book are “most [often] associated with Hawaii or the Pacific islands” by people living on the mainland. That is, his subjects are not all Hawaiian or Polynesian but have become associated with the Pacific in the minds of outlanders because of the potency of the tourism, advertising campaigns, literature, and art that has depicted the Hawaiian Islands as an escape and a tropical fantasyland apart from the United States—but for Americans—throughout the twentieth century. As Alexander tells us, “embracing the exotic fantasy world embodied in Hawaii and the Pacific means experiencing the joy of interacting with its population, whether face-to-face or through fantasies of the ideal of distant lands” (p. 6). The Hawaiian Islands as an imagined exotic and erotic island playground exists, of course, alongside the actual Hawaiian Islands. As Alexander acknowledges at the outset, “the Edenic dream called Hawaii became a state of mind well before it became a state” (p. 16). Yet the relationship between the two and the implications of the nebulous Hawaiian-cum-Pacific amalgam imagined by armchair orientalist and middle-class white Americans, tycoons, and politicians for Native Hawaiian people and the political status of the archipelago is left unexamined.

For a book that contends that “Hawaii’s biggest influence on the mainland was, ultimately, her people,” there are ample opportunities to feature more of them (p. 6). Mainstream Hawaiian artists Don Ho and Israel Kamakawiwo’ole, for example, are absent from this story even though Alexander devotes two of his ten chapters to music. Given Alexander’s focus on interracial romance, which largely seems to refer to “Caucasians whose fantasies included having sex with people of color,” it would have been helpful to hear directly

from some of the beachboys or women who engaged in sex work during the mid-twentieth century as well as from more of the activists and other people whose labor helped create and critique the United States' tourist and military infrastructure on the islands (p. 217). Many of these stories can be found in the University of Hawai'i Center for Oral History Archive. Furthermore, given Alexander's focus on women and how they have been represented by outsiders, it would have been nice to hear from more of them or to see him engage with the robust research and writing that has been done by scholars such as Haunani-Kay Trask, Jane Desmond, and Teresia Teaiwa on the sexualization of Hawaiian women, the commodification of Hawaiian culture, and the ways women's bodies have been used to conceal colonial violence in the Pacific. Additionally, there were places where typographical errors and factual inaccuracies made me wish the book was more carefully edited. For example, the Immigration Act of 1924 did not restrict immigration from the Philippines, which at the time was a US colony whose people were US nationals (p. 214).

Alexander, the founder and director of the Academic Film Archive of North America and author of *Films You Saw in School: A Critical Review of 1,153 Classroom Educational Films (1958-1985)* (2014) and *The Nonprofit Survival Guide: A Strategy for Sustainability* (2015), is a colorful raconteur. His enthusiasm for exotica and its influence on the United States is apparent. The book's chapters are filled with personal recollections and lengthy quotations from conversations and secondary sources, images, and YouTube links alongside short and memorable biographical sketches of people like Donn "Don the Beachcomber" Beach and Victor "Trader Vic" Bergeron, companionable competitors whose Polynesian-themed restaurants and fruity cocktails created and capitalized on a thirst for all things tiki on the mainland—and later in tourist-laden Hawaii—during the interwar and postwar periods. *America Goes Hawaiian* would be an interesting conversation partner for

the work of scholars like Haunani-Kay Trask, Jane Desmond, Gary Okihiro, Teresia Teaiwa, Margaret Jolly, Richard Lansdown, and Scott Laterman, as well as Adria Imada, whose 2012 *Aloha America: Hula Circuits through the U.S. Empire* Alexander cites throughout. The book would certainly spark discussion ("refusing to be provocative just spoils the fun," writes Alexander) in an undergraduate class on culture, American Empire, or gender and sexuality, and be worthwhile for people interested in an accessible, wide-ranging, and anecdote-filled overview of the facets of what so many who have never visited Hawaii think of as "Pacific island" culture (p. 6).

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