

Society of American Archivists 76th Annual Meeting

Friday, August 10, 2012

**Asian and Pacific Islanders (API) Creating Diverse
and Collaborative Community Archival Methods**

Hawaiians in Los Angeles

by Lessa K. Pelayo-Lozada

Our book, *Hawaiians in Los Angeles*, starts off in one of the most western ways possible. It starts off with “Ohana means Family. Family means nobody gets left behind, or forgotten”, a quote from Disney’s 2002 movie, *Lilo & Stitch*. What does this mean for a book which was written with the intent of showing the truth about Hawaiians and not sugar-coating the reasons people left and the harshness of life in the islands for the indigenous population? It means that preserving the history of our community is complicated, just like the role of Native Hawaiians in today’s community and the history of Native Hawaiians.

I’m going to give a brief overview of the contested history of Native Hawaiians to put my talk into perspective since many people don’t know that there are any issues. Much like the American Indians, Native Hawaiians were forced to give up their lands through a series of political moves made by American-Born plantation owners who were living in the Republic of Hawai’i. Since the arrival of Captain Cook, Hawaiians had been quickly introduced to capitalism and ownership in the form of loss. Loss of land, loss of life, and loss of broken treaties that they did not understand. As money was made off of the Hawaiian people and immigrants from Asia, the Pacific Rim, and Portugal, many different countries, including Japan and America wanted control. So in 1892, a group of American plantation owners overthrew the Hawaiian Monarchy, locking the queen in a room and putting the final nail in the coffin of Hawai’i’s entrance into America. At that point, Hawai’i became annexed and would eventually become a state in 1952.

By the time Hawai'i's citizens needed to vote on whether or not the territory should become a state, the education levels of Hawaiians had dramatically decreased. Under monarchy rule, Native Hawaiians had the highest literacy rate ever but as time under American control increased, education levels amongst the now minority Native Hawaiians decreased, limiting their political power through the inability to educate themselves on what was happening in their community, and for those who were fortunate to have the education, their political power was limited by voter laws modeled after Jim Crow. The entrance into statehood was divided amongst all residents of Hawai'i, Native Hawaiian and non-Native Hawaiian, and was also divided amongst families. Today, the same issues occur when there is discussion about sovereignty or self-control for Native Hawaiians. There is division everywhere, which makes it easier for those in control to continue forward.

This division makes it difficult to archive our community. There are those who are fine with western ways of collecting and preserving our past - like putting artifacts in museums and telling our stories to be written down by others. But there are those who want to use traditional means - primarily through Oral History and Talking Story.

The closest form of archiving would be to just record Oral Histories or ceremonies or hula dances. But this would just be a snapshot of a larger picture. A megapixel in a picture in a museum. That is because for communities where passing down traditions orally is so important, it is important to understand that each telling of a story or each ceremony is a little different. Oral histories are not only dependant upon the memorized part of the story or ceremony, but also upon the audience and how the audience is interacting with the teller. This makes it difficult to be able to prescribe one mode of preservation.

What we tried to do with Hawaiians in Los Angeles was to take all of these notions of preserving our history and putting them into one short book. Our mission in creating this book was not to show an entire history of Hawaiians in Los Angeles but to encourage people in the community to take their historical representation into their own hands. We tell everyone in book talks and such that, like I said, this is not a definitive history, but rather a small snapshot of those families who were available to show us their photos and share their stories in the time allotted to us by the publishers. We encourage those people who were not in the book for whatever reason to start sharing their stories in the mode of preservation that they are most comfortable with. Whether it's writing down their stories or talking story with their grandchildren or sitting down and recording an oral history. We tell them that it doesn't matter, just do it.

As a community, we cannot be restricted by what westerners define as acceptable forms of archiving and preservation. Otherwise, we would lose access to large chunks of our history. As a Native Hawaiian born and raised on the continent, my few and far between visits to my ancestral homeland are very important to me. When I go, I try to absorb as much culture as I can, in all of its forms. I visit museums and family. I visit places I've read about and danced about and learned chants about. I've opened myself up to the idea that preservation comes in as many forms as Native Hawaiians do and with as many different ideas and that we need to be respectful of everyone's beliefs if we want things to be preserved at all. We have to understand that some things are supposed to change over time and while it's disappointing to lose pieces of our history or certain rituals, there is purpose in progress. As the Native Hawaiian community had to change the ways they preserved and perpetuated their culture once they moved to the continent, so must we change the ways we look at what needs to be preserved and perpetuated.

To shift gears, I'll now briefly go over how we took these different ideas about preservation into account. None of the authors of the book are archivists, nor do we work in any type of museum. The closest is me, and I'm a Children's Librarian for Glendale Public Library. I wrote my Master's Thesis for my MLIS on the perpetuation and preservation of Hawaiian Culture in Los Angeles. In my research, I looked at culture as a type of information and all of the different formats through which it was disseminated throughout the community. Like I discussed with the different ways to preserve and archive, I found that cultural information was disseminated in many different ways.

For this book, we started writing the book with our own family. We interviewed my grandparents and aunts and uncles and went through their photographs. By using Arcadia Press, we were restricted in the formats we could use by photographs and pictures. So we had to convey a sense of talk story and oral history in two formats which don't necessarily lend themselves to interpretation in the same way that storytelling does. My grandparents were the gatekeepers in our research for the book. Their large role and activism within the Los Angeles Native Hawaiian community meant that they could introduce us and convince people to talk to us. Many of the connections in this book came from people who knew my grandparents and those that didn't directly come from my grandparents, we often found out along the way that they knew my grandparents in one way or another.

The interconnectedness of the Hawaiian Community cannot be stressed. People sought each other out and created a little Hawai'i in Los Angeles. The restaurants and night clubs where emigrants from Hawai'i congregated became the meeting places and focuses of our books. The newspapers and radio stations highlighting the Hawaiian community became those things that people suddenly wanted to preserve and remember they told us their stories. To this end, we are trying to help keep the community connected in an age where many of the Native Hawaiians

in Los Angeles are second or third generation born on the continent and only know Hawai'i as someplace they do in the summers. Sometimes for Christmas. But they've never lived there. Their perception of Hawai'i is different and their stories connecting them with Hawai'i and the culture are different than those of their parents and grandparents.

Which leads me to the inclusiveness of the book. To write a book about 100% pure Native Hawaiians would be a very short book. Throughout western contact, Native Hawaiians have had the highest rates of intermarriage out of all races in the United States. This means that Native Hawaiians look different and have many different experiences. It also means that there are people who are very close with the culture but who are not part of the culture in terms of blood. Hawaiianness in Hawai'i is everywhere. Hawai'i is the only state in the US with two official languages - English and Hawaiian, and the culture pervades everyone, regardless of ancestral origin. So, this means we also had to include those born in Hawai'i but not of Native Hawaiian descent. So we have three designations in the book:

Native Hawaiians are anyone who can trace their ancestry back to the arrival of Captain Cook in 1778, regardless of blood quantum.

Locals are anyone born and raised in Hawai'i

Hawaiians at heart are those without Hawaiian blood and those not born in Hawai'i who have been touched by the culture and want to perpetuate it.

The broad inclusiveness of our book means that we took many different approaches to preserving the stories we were told. We took videos of oral histories. We listened and took mental notes for those who wanted to go a more traditional route. We corresponded with people via email and asked them to share their stories that way if they were comfortable. We brought scanners to their houses to make them more comfortable with sharing their pictures. For those who were farther away or who couldn't/didn't want to open up their homes to us we

emailed scanning specifications for photos. We even converted someone's slides into digital format. After we converted their pictures, whether it be slides or photographs, we burned the photos onto discs so that they could share these digital copies with their families far and wide. We researched using academic books and small press books and books of poetry. And, we even turned to Disney's Lilo & Stitch to make sure we were including everyone. In the spirit of inclusion, we also discuss different aspects of the politics I discussed earlier and the different stances taken. We included a bibliography at the end which shows a broad spectrum of historical and current issues within the Hawaiian community. And we also included a glossary of Hawaiian words used.

Once we decided the story we wanted to tell about Native Hawaiians, Locals, and Hawaiians at heart in Los Angeles and wrote our story arc, we sent each participant their photo and the caption to make sure that they were being represented accurately. For the most part, we were spot on, or we were off by a year or two or someone let us know that they were wrong initially. We only had repeated re-writes for larger businesses who had financial interests at heart. We did this, though, to ensure accuracy and also to ensure that the community felt included in the creation of the book. Preservation and perpetuation can't happen alone. It has to be a community effort.

As a whole, the community has been very positive in its response to our book. Some felt that only people with Native Hawaiian blood should have been included, but we explained to them that that's not what the Hawaiian community in Los Angeles looks like. It's much more diverse than that. Most people are just happy that the next generation is taking on the call to continue perpetuating the culture and taking on the burden of maintaining and continuing to build a Hawaiian community away from the ancestral homeland. Many are also taking this as a cue

that it's time to share the stories of building the culture here before everyone is gone. There are too many stories that have already been lost and it's time to preserve what we have built.