Made in Hawai'i: Critical Studies and the Academy for Creative Media

Konrad Ng
Academy for Creative Media, University of Hawai'i

Hawaii's Creative Media Education Agenda

Since U.S. annexation of the isles in 1898, the former kingdom has changed from being a primarily plantation-based economy to one that is being driven by tourism and the U.S. military. However, over the past decade, several legislative and educational events in Hawai'i have signaled the state's expectation that there will be an increasing role for cinema and digital media in the development and diversification of its economy. In 2000, the Hawai'i State Legislature established the Hawaii Television & Film Development Board to help grow the film and television industry by providing support to Hawaii's local filmmakers. From 2001 to 2006, the legislature passed Acts 221, 215 and 88, a series of government incentives and tax credits designed to encourage investment and entrepreneurialism in Hawaii's film, television, video, and digital media industries. In 2006, the state of Hawai'i completed multi-million dollar renovations to the Hawaii Film Studio so that the state now has a modern film and television production facility that is comparable to studio spaces in Hollywood. In 2008, Hawai'i's governor, Linda Lingle, proposed the establishment of "Creative Academies" that "would focus on animation, digital media, game development, and writing and publishing in elementary through high school" (Lingle, 2008, p. 7). The governor's emphasis on teaching new media skills and literacy to students reflected the objectives of the Innovation Initiative—her program to cultivate a highly skilled, knowledge-based workforce to help promote the high technology industry in Hawai'i (State of Hawai'i, 2007).

In conjunction with government plans to use creative media as a way to diversify the state economy, the University of Hawai'i's Board of Regents approved the Academy for Creative Media (ACM) in January 2004. The ACM became the university's primary academic program for the production and study of film, animation, and computer game design from technical, indigenous, and critical perspectives.

In the program's founding documents, then-ACM chairman and Hollywood film producer, Chris Lee, stated that the ACM would "create something unique to Hawai'i that's marketable on a global scale and is dedicated to diversifying our local economy" (Lee, 2004a, p. 5). Lee envisioned an educational initiative that would not follow a traditional "Hollywood-centric" model of film school that relied on expensive film equipment and focused on preparing students to work in the Hollywood studio system, admitting that there were "already standards of excellence such as USC, UCLA, and NYU against which we cannot compete" (p. 5). Rather, Lee believed, the curriculum of the ACM should promote indigenous stories and storytelling and meet the demands of the global information/entertainment economy. Such an economy is

> driven by a rising tide of affluence and the ever-widening availability of distribution systems, [consequently,] there is an exponential need for intellectual property and programming to fill those [media] pipelines. Hawai'i students have a logical and rightful place in the creation of this content, not just in Hollywood, but here in Hawai'i (pp. 5–6).

Lee believed that it was possible to establish a creative media program in Hawai'i if it offered a curriculum that taught skills across digital media platforms and emphasized the cultural specificity of the islands. Moreover, the widening of distribution systems meant that ACM graduates could remain in Hawai'i and their work would help diversify the state's economy. In subsequent interviews, Lee stated that the ACM is "…about branching out our economy here in Hawai'i" (Lee, 2004c) and that the program could be "a big part of Hawai'i's future, but it's nothing if we don't convince people to build their own companies or for companies to come here. The (financial) return (for the state) will be whether we've incubated new companies here" (Lee, 2004b).

The collaborative effort by the state and university to use cinema and digital media as the vehicle for economic transformation displays faith in the premise that Hawai'i can be re-defined by these investments. I share this faith. In my roles as the former curator of film and video at the Honolulu Academy of Arts and as a former film festival programmer with the Hawai'i International Film Festival, I advocated the development of a Hawai'i film industry. Now, I am an assistant professor of critical studies in the ACM where I favor making full use of local resources to develop the creative media industry. Given my current and previous investments in promoting the state's and university's creative media agenda, I want to share my thoughts on the rise of cinema and digital media education in Hawai'i and the importance of thinking ethically about culture and representation. Media theorist, Henry Jenkins, claims that most conversations about new media refer to either an inventory of new tools, emerging technologies, or improved technical proficiency of machines or by humans, rather than discuss new media's cultural effects. Jenkins contends that "[u]nderstanding the nature of our relationship with media is central to any attempt to develop a curriculum that might foster the skills and competencies needed to engage within [this] participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2006). As such, I believe the critical question to ask of Hawaii's creative media agenda is this: will this innovative collaboration between industry, governance, and education in Hawai'i transform the existing forces of cultural, rather than just economic, power that governs the state? The state can help develop the local film, television, and digital media industry and the university can supply students with equipment and offer technical instruction, but what should also be discussed is how future creative media graduates become part of Hawaii's cultural economy and producers of its representations in film, television, animations, and computer games. While my thinking on this topic is exploratory, I intend to expand the picture of creative media education in Hawai'i and suggest new considerations relating to its cultural dimensions as this agenda advances.

Representing Hawai'i

The cultural dimension of a state economy that is dominated by tourism and the U.S. military is reflected in the mass of literature, television programming, and films that project the image of Hawai'i as the very ideal of a welcoming tropical paradise—beaches, waves, surfers, and grass-skirted hula dancers. Hawai'i is also the site of Pearl Harbor, a symbol of U.S. military power in the Pacific and the country's entry into World War II. The popular representation of Hawai'i as home to tourism and the U.S. military naturalizes the presence of these industries in the islands and reflects a reductive cycle of cultural politics. The economic health of tourism and the military relies, in part, on the continued representation of Hawai'i as a tourist destination and strategic and historic site. That is, the imagery of tourism and the military is used to justify the allocation of economic resources and sustain the industries' continued operation. In turn, the power of these representations of Hawai'i is sustained by the continuing economic influence of tourism and the military. Because tourism and the military drive the state economy, they are able to represent life in Hawai'i in a way that crowds out alternative representations, especially local perspectives that run counter to tourism's picture of an idyllic place of sun and leisure or those that project Hawai'i's historic and strategic importance. As such, the kinds of creative media works that are popular, such as Hollywood films, do not reflect the range of representations and stories that exist in the islands. For example, the narrative premise of popular films that choose to film in Hawai'i, such as *Pearl Harbor* (Dir: Michael Bay, 2001), *50 First Dates* (Dir: Peter Segal, 2004), or more recently, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (Dir: Nicholas Stoller, 2008), reflects and assists the cultural economy of tourism and the military such that island realities such as homelessness, Native Hawaiian sovereignty, plantation history or the stories of everyday lives that exist alongside, but are not rooted in, tourism and the military, are excluded.

In response, some scholars have argued for a more ethical representation of Hawai'i. Haunani-Kay Trask (1991), for example, makes a forceful argument to show that the tourism industry has dispossessed *kanaka maoli* (Native Hawaiian) identity, culture, and land. In another work, Jane Desmond (2001) traces the exploitative dynamics of tourism's representation of "native" bodies in Hawai'i. Kathy Ferguson and Phyllis Turnbull (1999) have studied the signs and symbols of the U.S. military in Hawai'i and show how these images dominate the historical meaning and everyday use of the archipelago's landscape. Houston Wood (1999) explores "how journalism, novels, diaries, advertisements, visual arts, museums, films, television shows, and various

other types of cultural productions assist the more naked coercion associated with armies, revolutions, and the criminal justice system" in the usurpation of Hawaiian lands and the displacement of indigenous Hawaiian culture (p. 9). These studies suggest the importance of adopting a critical perspective on the cultural economy of Hawai'i. I also see their perspectives as a testament to the value of teaching creative media students to embrace an ethics of representation that encourages more fully developed depictions of Hawai'i that may challenge the cultural status quo. In other words, an argument can be made for the inclusion of critical studies in creative media education and the significance of diversifying Hawai'i's cultural economy.

What is Critical Studies?

Broadly, the critical study of creative media refers to the historical, aesthetic, and theoretical examination of media production and the power of its representations. Critical studies adds important reflection to an educational field that, as Henry Jenkins' comment pointed out, tends to focus on technical instruction. Many universities include critical studies in their curriculum, indeed, many of the essays in this issue of *Educational Perspectives* are examples of critical studies perspectives on creative media. However, critical studies at the ACM is guided by a unique imperative that I would like to describe in more detail.

At the ACM, critical studies is shaped by the cultural specificity of Hawai'i. The critical dynamic of culture and geography is illustrated by comparing the description of critical studies at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts (SCA), one of the nation's premier programs for critical studies, and the curricular description of the ACM. At the SCA,

> [t]he Division of Critical Studies is committed to the understanding of film, television and new media in relation to the world. By studying and analyzing these forms and the processes behind their creation, Critical Studies scholars gain insight into the power and aesthetics of moving image media.[1]

At the ACM, the program

> emphasizes narrative, or story telling, theories, skills and application across multiple platforms of digital media and within a context of cultural and aesthetic values. More than just a "film school,"

ACM seeks to empower students to tell their own stories of Hawaii, the Pacific and Asia rather than have those stories told for them through a different cultural lens that is distant and often distorted.[2]

The distinction between the two programs is small, but fundamental; critical studies at the ACM is shaped by the recognition of the archipelago's uneven cultural economy. Given the predominance of tourism and the military, the educational imperative is ACM is to respond to existing representations of Hawai'i and promote different kinds of stories and imagery. In the proposal for the ACM, Chris Lee emphasized the role of the ACM in diversifying the economy of Hawai'i, but he also described the program's curricular focus:

> The focus is on narrative and storytelling, but the scope will navigate the entire Pacific Rim and beyond[;]…it's an educational initiative that embraces the unique opportunities of this special place we call home by providing a platform for indigenous filmmakers to tell their stories to the broadest possible audience (Lee, 2004a, p. 6).

Lee's reference to "indigenous filmmakers" is noteworthy because of its embrace of a wider range of lived experience in Hawai'i, rather than focusing solely on those cultural productions promoted by tourism and the U.S. military. An indigenous perspective reflects stories and storytellers rooted in the archipelago's everyday dynamics and complicated history; it includes Native and Non-Native Hawaiian experiences as well as the tensions that may exist between them. Such textured narratives include stories of divisions that linger from Hawaii's plantation era or the displacement of Native Hawaiians and their search for empowerment. In effect, the focus of the ACM on encouraging "indigenous filmmakers" recognizes the broad range of experiences that are available and specific to Hawai'i, but have been excluded from dominant representations of Hawai'i.

In *Reimagining the American Pacific: From South Pacific to Bamboo Ridge and Beyond*, Rob Wilson highlights a similar imperative at work in the Hawai'i-based journal, *Bamboo Ridge: Journal of Hawai'i Literature and Art*. Wilson contends that the journal's selection of literature that reflects "an island sensibility,"[3] as opposed to works that reflect the portrait of Hawai'i composed by tourism and the military, presents a "cultural politics of place-bound

identity expressing…symbols/acts/tactics of local resistance to metropolitan centers of culture" (Wilson, 2000, p. 134). As Michael Shapiro notes in his work on aesthetics as political critique, *Deforming American Political Thought: Ethnicity, Facticity, and Genre*, art forms such as film, music and literature, can express identities that are excluded or marginalized by the dominant culture. For Shapiro, the resulting expressions are ways that people resist and redefine representations not of their own making. Aesthetic expressions can be

> modes of self-fashioning by those who flee imposed identities in order to achieve a state of non-closural becoming…[and a way for] those who tend to be excluded, given the way that recognizable "politics" is policed, assemble to contest imposed identities, deform conventional modes of intelligibility, struggle to survive economically, socially, and politically, or articulate, through writing, sounds, built structures, or images, aspects of a life and thought-world that are officially unheeded. (Shapiro, 2006, p. xv)

Wilson and Shapiro offer useful perspectives that describe the role of critical studies in Hawai'i. Critical studies encourages cultural production in Hawai'i to be part of an larger commitment to an ethics of indigeneity. The underlying idea is to assist in the diversification of Hawai'i's cultural economy by addressing its distortions and recognizing that a broader range of expressions is both possible and necessary. What I am arguing for, therefore, is that creative media education in Hawai'i should ask students to consider and critique their role as producers of creative media in the cultural economy of the islands.

The Promise of ACM Student Work

To summarize my argument so far, Hawai'i's economic, educational, and legislative agenda may emphasize the diversification of the state economy, but we should not overlook the importance of challenging the existing forces of cultural power in Hawai'i. We need to develop a curriculum that promotes indigenous storytelling and its ethical commitments so that cinema and digital media education contributes to Hawai'i's cultural imaginary in new and empowering ways. To an extent, a number of recent ACM student films variously reflect this dynamic between dominant and indigenous representations.

While the production value of ACM student films is not yet at the level of professional media works, their work offers indigenous points of embarkation that challenge popular representations of Hawai'i. In 2004, ACM student filmmaker Kaliko Palmiera won an audience award at the Hawai'i International Film Festival 2004 for *Steve Ma'i'i*—a short documentary about his father, musician Steve Ma'i'i. This engaging film traces his father's role as a Hawaiian music artist and activist during the 1970s. *Steve Ma'i'i* uses the genre of biography to present in an original way the rise of Hawaiian music entertainment as a movement for Native Hawaiian identity. By doing so, Palmiera offers an alternative to the popular representation of Hawaiian music as a tourist entertainment and commodity. In another example, *Plastic Leis*, an award-winning short film by ACM student filmmaker Tyrone Sanga, depicts the removal of an elderly lei seller from Waikīkī. Drawing on the plight of this woman, the film offers a meditation on Hawaiian culture and its collision with tourist commercialism. Her expulsion from Waikīkī represents the symbolic displacement of Native Hawaiians in Hawai'i. *Plastic Leis* garnered the Best Hawaiian Short Film award at the 2006 Big Island Film Festival. In 2006, Sanga completed, *Follow the Leader*, a short film that gestures to racial-ethnic tensions in Hawai'i through the narrative of children collecting baseball cards. In *Follow the Leader*, a child of Asian descent feels intimidated by an older and larger boy of Pacific/Hawaiian descent when he is asked by the older boy to purchase a baseball card from an Asian storeowner who is suspicious of the older boy. The film reveals the kind of divisions that linger from the Hawai'i plantation era when racial and ethnic tensions were used to help manage plantations workers. Sanga's films depict Hawai'i in a way that departs from the narratives presented by tourism or the military. *Plastic Leis* is critical of tourism, tying its rise to the decline of Native Hawaiians while *Follow the Leader* gestures to racial-ethnic tensions that underlie tourism's rosier picture. ACM student filmmaker Roger Nakamine's *Sore Shoulders and Aching Joints* uses comedic motifs rooted in the "island sensibility" identified by *Bamboo Ridge* to relate a story about contemporary dating in the islands. The romantic atmosphere of Waikiki is exchanged for the locality of Wai'anae and University of Hawai'i students are featured as the protagonists rather than tourists. The main characters discuss issues such as dating and friendship and the story unfolds in karaoke bars

instead of on the beach. In 2007, ACM student filmmakers Dana Ledoux Miller's *Matalasi* and Joelle-Lyn Sarte's *Home Again* show the diasporic conflicts experienced by two women who return to Hawai'i to reconnect with their Pacific and Asian culture and family. What also connects these student films is that each film does not end with full narrative closure. The filmmakers avoid arriving at some profound revelation or resolution, and as such, the meaning of the story is not fixed; the depiction of how life is led in Hawai'i remains an open question.

These works, made by students in an education program guided by the ethical commitments of critical studies, illustrate how films can re-deploy indigenous tropes and circulate alternative representations of island life in the state's cultural economy. By encouraging students to envision a representation of Hawai'i that does not conform to the image of Hawai'i as a tourist destination or the historic and strategic military site, students can compose a more nuanced cultural imaginary that allows for new and more progressive depictions of Hawai'i—depictions that more accurately reflect the lives of people who live in Hawai'i rather than the representation of Hawai'i produced by tourism and the military.

If the goal of the creative media education agenda in Hawai'i is to equip students with the technical skills necessary to produce media and become active workers in the new media landscape, then indigenous ethics should be an important component of the curriculum. Indeed, we need to do more than merely service tourism or feed existing national narratives. As educators of creative media, our aim should be to diversify Hawai'i's cultural economy and encourage our students to go beyond cultural reproduction and encourage conscientious artistic production.

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ENDNOTES

[1] http://cinema.usc.edu/programs/critical-studies/application-procedures-cs.htm

[2] http://www.hawaii.edu/acm/acadprog/acmmajor.shtml

[3] http://www.bambooridge.com/aboutus.aspx