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Publication Date

2014

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

The Maui Mentality: Experience, Influence, and *Aloha* in the Movement Practice of Five Maui
Dance Artists

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Alexandra Kozuki McKeon

Thesis Committee:
Professor Loretta Livingston, Chair
Professor Jennifer Fisher
Professor Alan Terricciano

2014

DEDICATION

To

my parents, Bill and Kathleen McKeon

Thank you for all you have sacrificed so that I may pursue my education and dreams of being a dance artist. Thank you for raising me on Maui, a place that has largely shaped my internal landscape, perspective on life, and the entirety of this research. Thank you for your endless love, trust, and support.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by expressing my deep appreciation and gratitude to my thesis chair, Professor Loretta Livingston for her guidance and support. Thank you for helping me to ask the right questions and encouraging me to be confident in my own voice. I would also like to thank my committee members Professor Jennifer Fisher and Professor Alan Terricciano for their supportive energies toward this project. And to the Dance Department Faculty and Claire Trevor School of the Arts, thank you for this growing experience.

I acknowledge my five research participants, most of whom I have known since I was a young girl. Thank you for sharing and trusting me with your very personal stories and experiences.

To my four dancers and collaborators, Tracy, Raymond, Andrea, and Julianna - Thank you for dedicating yourselves to this work and for approaching every rehearsal with intensity, integrity, and an immense amount of care and attention. You have inspired and touched me with your artistry and uplifting spirit. I will miss you all dearly.

I do not have enough words to express my deep gratitude to Kyle Pineo. Thank you for starting this journey with me two years ago, understanding my need to give myself completely to this process, putting up with me on my most unbearable days, and for your endless support.

I extend my greatest gratitude to my loving family who has supported me wholeheartedly as I pursue my passions. Thank you for all you have sacrificed so that I may continue my education and chase my dreams.

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

The Maui Mentality: Experience, Influence, and *Aloha* in the Movement Practice of Five Maui Dance Artists

By

Alexandra Kozuki McKeon

Master of Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2014

Professor Loretta Livingston, Chair

This qualitative research study explores the experiences and values of five Maui dance artists who believe Maui has influenced their movement practice. The experiences of my five research participants, collectively, provide a glimpse into the complex nature of *aloha* on Maui. *Aloha*, which means love, kindness, sympathy, and compassion, and refers to the welcome extended to strangers in Hawaii, also has a history of smoothing over ethnic tensions resulting in feelings of exclusion. Correspondingly, *Aloha* emerges as a shared ideal and influence on mindset and approach to dance for all of my research participants. The interplay of experience, influence, and *aloha*, while not always harmonious, manifests in each of my research participants' value of cultivating and sharing with the community through their dance practice. This research is also a parallel reflexive study of the complexity and richness of my Maui experience, which has led to a deepened understanding of my own identity as a Local and as a dancer/choreographer.

CHAPTER 1

GIRL FROM HAWAII

Wherever I go, people remember me as the “girl from Hawaii.” It makes me feel special, unique. I can’t help but grin proudly as eyes widen and faces light up when I say I was born and raised on Maui. The envy and wonder of those who exclaim, “Wow, you’re from Hawaii? You are so lucky . . .” has never lost its luster. However, once the conversation inevitably shifts to “what was it like growing up on Maui?” or “what is Maui like?”, I struggle to find my words.

I was born and raised on Maui before coming to the mainland for college and graduate school when I was 18. For purposes of transparency, I am not Native Hawaiian. I am half-Japanese and half-Irish. My maternal great-great-grandmother emigrated from Japan and worked in the sugarcane plantations on Maui. I am considered *Yonsei*, which is fourth generation Japanese in Hawaii. My dad is full Irish and moved to Hawaii after meeting my mom in college in California. I am what people on the island would consider *hapa*, which is a Hawaiian word that means “part” or “mixed.” When I was in middle school, my parents started sending me to ballet intensives on the mainland, and the friends I made insisted that I was Hawaiian. For most of these girls, I was the first person from Hawaii they had ever met. At that young age, it was difficult for me to explain, and for those young girls to understand, that just because you are born in Hawaii does not mean you are Hawaiian.

Social categorization is one of my most prominent Maui experiences. As a result, I feel compelled to immediately and clearly define what I *am* ethnically as well as what I am *not*. Ethnicity, social class and genealogy are important to people on Maui as they are often used to identify, place, and classify people into similar groups. In this thesis research, I will share the experiences of five movement practitioners as they express their awareness of Maui culture and

dominant social categorizations in relation to their dance practice. I will tell their stories through a narrator's eye in order to get to the heart of their complex individual experiences. I will also share my own notions of identity using experiential first-person narrative to reveal my own anxieties of selfhood.¹ Through the lens of my disciplinary orientation as a contemporary dance choreographer and performer, I will delve into the Maui mentality and how it is reflected, represented, and manifested through dance practice.

My Maui Experience

I often feel great pressure to describe my Maui upbringing in a way that fits my peers' perceptions of Hawaii. Living in California for the past seven years, I have learned that people are most interested in knowing if I dance hula or surf—both of which I do not. I think of Maui in terms of my everyday experiences, like standing on the lanai of my house, looking at the breathtaking view of Kahului Harbor and Haleakala Volcano, and the way the land and sea come together like a watercolor painting. I think of the cravings I get for Chevron's spam musubi, Da Kitchen's loco mocos and kalua pork, Sam Sato's dry mein, and Zippy's chili. I think of the subtly sweet smell of the humidity and how it envelops my skin. I think of riding my bike at Keopuolani Park with my family, going to potluck with my friends, hiking in Iao Valley, participating in marching band and homecoming snake dance, attending Japanese *Obon* dances at the Maui Hongwanji, going to the Maui County Fair at War Memorial Park, and "cruising" at Queen Ka'ahumanu Shopping Center. I think about my dedication to dancing ballet and jazz every day after school at the Maui Academy of Performing Arts, and performing at the Maui

¹ The style of this written research has been heavily influenced by Dorinne Kondo's compelling book *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*. Kondo's use of an auto-ethnographic, "experiential" approach to problematize and understand the complexity and richness of her experiences resonated strongly with my own intention of drawing out, analyzing, and understanding the evocative experiences of my research participants.

Arts and Cultural Center every spring. I think of my loving family and community of friends and mentors who have helped to shape who I am today, who keep me rooted to the Valley Isle, and who are the most important people I associate with home.²

Hawaii is not the superficial vacation destination it is made out to be. Underneath its shiny exterior is a unique history, culture, and community that run deeper than the roots of a *Kiawe* tree, but is so often overlooked.³ There is a controversial history of the Hawaiian people who were overthrown by the U.S. government and who fight and struggle, to this day, to redefine who they are as a people and nation. There is a vibrant mixing of cultures as well as ethnic clashes that define the experiences of the people who live there. But when people ask me what it was like to grow up on Maui, I usually tell them what they want to hear in order to avoid bombarding them with a long, complicated answer. I tell them it was a great place to grow up, with tremendous beauty in both the land and people. I choose to leave out that majority of my classmates throughout my schooling were poverty-stricken, that the number of homeless people who live in the grass field across Foodland in Kahului is growing, and that the drug abuse and addiction problem is often discussed in the news. I leave out the fact that I have struggled my whole life to find my place in a community that has lingering resentment toward Caucasians.

I leave out the fact that growing up and living on Maui is probably not so different from their own experience; every town, city, state, country, or place in general has a unique geography, climate, and culture. I don't want to break the illusion for my interlocutors that there is just as much struggle as there is beauty on the island of Maui. Through this research, I have found that, more importantly, I did not want to break this illusion for myself.

² "Valley Isle" is another name used to refer to Maui.

³ There is a large population of *Kiawe* in Hawaii and is considered an extremely valuable tree because of its ability to control erosion, among many other uses (Skolmen).

My Coming of Age as a Dancer

In both my professional and social circles in California, I am one of the few people from Hawaii. I enjoy when my peers don't understand what I mean when I say "shoots" (meaning "okay!") in response to their ideas, or the fact that I refuse to call slippers "flip flops."⁴ While some of my friends see these things as my quirks, I am proud of these small differences because it connects me back to the uniqueness of Maui. In fact, I began this research because I thought there was something special about my dancing *because* I grew up on Maui.

I have often been told that my dancing reminds people of Hawaii. In my first quarter of graduate school in my Laban Movement Analysis class, my classmates and I were improvising, using Laban terminology as prompts for movement. One of my classmates almost immediately began contemplating aloud how I had attained my fluid movement quality and if it might be related to growing up on Maui. He referenced swaying palm trees, beautiful oceans, and the laid-back lifestyle; this was not the first time I had heard this interpretation of my dancing. At my college graduation, my modern dance teacher and four-year mentor, Diane Frank, presented me my diploma and then spoke of my journey through the Stanford Dance Department: "She came to us from Maui as a Freshman, and I'd like to think that informs her signature way of dancing. She has a silken way of unspooling movement. It is smooth, unruffled and luxurious, and there's amplitude and generosity in it as well" (Frank). People often made connections about the way I talk, view life, and dance as all being very "Hawaiian." And I have accepted it, grateful even, never really thinking about *why* it made me so happy to have people connect most everything I do with Maui.

This thesis has brought the question of "how do I reflect Maui?" to the forefront, and I have uncovered complex realities to which I had never attended. My investigation of Maui's

⁴ The term "flip flops" is mainly used by tourists. In Hawaii, residents refer to "flip-flops" as "slippers."

influence on movement practice grew into a deeper questioning, investigation, and eventual self-realization of my own issues of identity. After conducting this research, I now acknowledge that I am, in large part, an accumulation of how others have defined me and I continue to shift my identity depending on my surrounding context to this day. On Maui, I have always been and continue to be concerned with my belonging in the community, which is something my Caucasian friends and I have had to earn. On Maui, I am considered a “Local” *Hapa Haole*, and in order to gain a deeper understanding of what that means and where I “fit” in the Maui community, I must first contextualize some of the characteristics of these group categorizations.

Rhetoric of Hawaiian, “Local,” *Hapa*, and *Haole* Identity

Judy Van Zile, in her article “Non-Polynesian Dance in Hawai’i: Issues of Identity in a Multicultural Community,” defines Hawaiian identity as grounded in one’s “genetic roots and the ethnicities in one’s biological heritage” (43). In this way, being Hawaiian refers to being of the Native Hawaiian ethnicity, which means having “blood ties to the early Polynesian inhabitants of the islands” (33). Jonathan Osorio, Director of the Kamakakuokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies at the University of Hawaii, offers a different perspective on the Hawaiian identity in his essay “On Being Hawaiian.” He believes that being Hawaiian isn’t just related to one’s blood, ancestry, or even cultural proficiency (23). He says, “. . . being Hawaiian is ultimately about not wishing to be anything else” (23). This means claiming the responsibilities that come with choosing to be Hawaiian:

We don’t want to be part-Hawaiian. We don’t want to be part of a country that is aiming for something very different and has very different values and very different understandings of its role in history. If we are to be the true legacy of our ancestors—and I mean not just our distant ancestors but our immediate ancestors like Lili’u and Nawahi, and even Kuhio—we need to resurrect the nation. We need to be a country again. (Osorio 25)

The Hawaiian identity is multifaceted, with a few dimensions residing in ethnicity, culture, a history of supremely unjust treatment at the hands of the U.S. government, and their continued fight for sovereignty. The depth and breadth of the Hawaiian identity exceeds the scope of this research but is important to the basic understanding of cultural dynamics on Maui and consequently, Maui's influence on my research participants' dance practices. Because the Hawaiian identity is comprised of many dynamic layers and is not just a label that connects a person to her birthplace in Hawaii, I have always been adamant in correcting those who mistake me for being Hawaiian. In this research, I will be using Van Zile's definition of "Hawaiian" which refers to one's ethnicity because it reflects most Maui residents' usage of the term.

On Maui, one part of my identity is being a "Local," which is a "category of group identity used to describe those who were born and raised in Hawaii, or long-time residents, who see themselves as distinctly different from the mainland" (Young 92). Darrell Lum, in his article "What School You Went? Local Culture, Local Identity, and Local Language: Stories of Schooling in Hawaii," discusses the Local identity and culture, which originates from the Hawaii sugar plantations. The Asian immigrants and Native Hawaiians who worked on the plantations shared a value system that brought them into coalition with one another and into opposition with their white plantation bosses (7). All laborers were in a subservient position to their white bosses, who maintained control by manipulating ethnic groups against one another through pay difference and segregated housing (7). However, the Asian immigrants' values of "family, loyalty, obligation, and reciprocity," and the Native Hawaiians' values of "harmony between people, minimized personal gain or achievement, and shared natural resources" ultimately brought the two groups together (7). As a result, "the local identity is characterized as a culture of resistance against the dominant white culture" (12). Decades after the sugar plantation days,

the Local identity continues to evolve with Hawaii culture to incorporate new meanings, values, and ideas. Keiko Ohnuma's article "Local Haole—A Contradiction in Terms?" summarizes

Chris Leong's contemporary study of the Local by saying:

. . . He concluded there is no single definition, that the term is relative, gradational and shifts meaning with the speaker and situation, and finally that it is a marker of belonging that must be agreed upon by others. Pressed to make concrete distinctions, almost everyone he interviewed concluded that 'Local' is above all an 'attitude.' (277)

Taking into account these various definitions, I have experienced the Local identity and culture still values 1) a genealogy connecting a person back to the islands, 2) a latent resistance or opposition to the white mainland culture otherwise known as *haole*, and 3) a shared value of relationships and love for the land. In this research, I will be using Local to mean residents who were born and raised on Maui or who fall somewhere on this continuum.

Ines Miyares, Professor of Geography at Hunter College, in her article "Expressing Local Culture in Hawaii," defines the Local culture as the mainstream culture of Hawaii that encompasses a multicultural community made up of varying ethnicities, races, and backgrounds. Filipinos, Tongans, Samoans, Koreans, Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Portuguese and of course Native Hawaiians are just a handful of different ethnic groups that identify themselves under the Local identity (520). For Miyares, *Haoles* who act and speak like Locals, can also eventually be accepted under this identity (520). However, underlying what seems to be an accepting culture based on the Hawaiian motto Spirit of Aloha, which claims to welcome "everyone regardless of ethnic or racial background," are tensions among those who live there (514). One possible cause of this tension can be linked to the continually evolving shape of the Local identity and how it is being challenged by "native Hawaiian sovereignty, the inability to include new immigrant groups, the retreat to ethnic enclaves, or heightened class distinctions due to a foundering economy" (Lum 9). The cause for this tension is undoubtedly manifold and

exceeds the scope of this paper; however it is important to this research because it is a major undercurrent in my Maui experience as well as the experiences of four of my research participants, which I will discuss later in this paper.

The two other group categorizations I fall under are *hapa* and *haole*. For Locals in Hawaii, *hapa haole* refers generally to people of mixed-race ancestry. I have always been proud of being *hapa haole* and Local, and used these identities throughout my life to perpetuate my own feelings of acceptance within the Maui community. However, the stigma of my white skin and its association with the *haole*, foreigner, or outsider, has always overpowered my notions of self.

The derogatory notions associated with the *haole* stems from the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy by white colonialists:

Just as the *haole*, or foreigner, is the quintessence of all that pressed in on the Hawaiian way of life in the nineteenth century, so the mainland *haole* is the quintessence of all that is pressing in on the Islands in the twentieth. Thus the present-day white migrant . . . is the visible reminder of converging imposition. (Whittaker 142)

Even though I am not an immigrant to Maui and my family has lived there for four generations, my fair skin has always put me in association with the White outsider. I have desperately aspired to achieve Local status among my peers. Yet, despite having an insider's knowledge of the cultural, social, and political workings on the island and a deep respect for the place and people who live there, I have been unable to completely escape my white exterior. In an attempt to reconcile my issues of identity, I am utilizing an ethnographic approach to investigate how I, as well as five other movement practitioners, reflect Maui through our individual movement practices.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to listen to five hula and contemporary dance artists, all of whom call Maui, Hawaii “home,” describe how they believe Maui influences their teaching, performance practice, and choreographic work. My five research participants are: 1) Julia Cost, a Maui-born Local *haole* who lived on Maui for 18 years before moving to California to live and work as a choreographer, 2) Rebecca Owen, also a Local *haole* who was born and raised on Maui, lives in Kihei (south side of Maui) and is the director of a new professional contemporary dance company named Ampersand, 3) David Ward, the Director of Seabury Hall’s High School dance program, who was born and raised in New York, moved to Maui at age 25, and has lived there for two and a half decades 4) Hallie Hunt, who moved to Maui five years ago and is a founding member and main choreographer of Adaptations Dance Theater, and 5) Hokulani Holt Padilla, a Native Hawaiian *Kumu* Hula who was born and raised on Maui and O’ahu and who serves as the Cultural Programmer for the Maui Arts and Cultural Center. Although my participants range in their backgrounds (three grew up on Maui and two moved to Maui), ethnicity (Hawaiian and *haole*), and dance practices (hula, contemporary/modern dance, dance theater), they share the same love for their home, Maui, and believe their movement practice has been influenced, in part, by living there.

This research is important because the Local vs. *haole* discourse continues to exclude white residents on the island who strive for a sense of belonging. Regardless of ethnic orientation, the awareness of the community dynamic and how to “fit in” is a prominent undercurrent in my research. Therefore I would like to explore how the “Maui mentality,” which I am using in this paper to describe shared values, experiences, attitudes, opinions, and mindsets that reflect Maui culture, manifests in the movement practice of my five research participants.

In this research, I delve into my five participants' personal experience, relationship, and resonance with the multicultural make-up of Maui and how they believe it is reflected through their dance practice.

This research has also been a parallel reflexive study of the complexity and richness of my Maui experience, giving way to a deepened understanding of my own identity. Reflecting back on the process of conducting in-person interviews, I found that I took a position similar to many of those who asked me, "What was it like to grow up on Maui?" I clung to the words that I expected or hoped to hear; "beauty, nature, grounded, gentle, and fluid." However, when I began transcribing the interviews, shared concepts that emerged were "community, sharing, tension and restriction." I realized that I had fallen subject to the very social practice of preconceived categorization that has made me feel marginalized my entire life. By listening to these five Maui dance practitioners talk about the importance of community and their value of people, I have begun to reconcile my struggles with being white, not being Hawaiian, and my desire to belong.

CHAPTER 2

EXPERIENCING *ALOHA*

When I think of Hawaii I really think of my homeland. I think of the deep and abiding love that I have for the place not only as a physical entity, but the place as a giver of life to me, my family, and my ancestors who came before me. So, when I think of Hawaii, I think of the abiding love that I have for this place. (Padilla)

I began every interview with the question “When you think about Maui, what do you think of?” I wanted to gain an understanding of my five participants’ individual Maui experiences and how it has shaped their internal landscape. I wondered if some of their answers would later resurface in the ways they believe Maui has influenced their movement practice. My participants expressed answers unique to their own upbringing and situation. Rebecca Owen, a Local born Maui girl and director of Ampersand, a new contemporary dance company on Maui, said “I see the colors, green and brown; I think of the ocean, surfing, mountains to the sea, and the simpler life” (Owen). Julia Cost, another Maui Local who currently lives in Berkeley, California working as a choreographer and visual artist, responded by describing an experience: “I think about coming home and flying over the sugarcane fields; I think about seeing my family” (Cost). All of my participants’ reflections were refreshingly different from my own and what I had expected to find.

As I continued on to my second question of the interview, “What ideals do you associate with Hawaii?”, I found interesting points of overlap and contradiction. All of my participants brought up the ideal “acceptance,” either in terms of feeling extremely welcomed or feeling out of place. For example, Hokulani offered valuable insights into the inclusiveness of *ohana*, which means family and includes extended family in Hawaii. She stressed the importance of this form of the Hawaiian collective for island people. David Ward and Hallie Hunt said they felt a warmth emanating from the Maui community and feel as if they were accepted immediately into

what Hokulani deemed the “collective”—a web of people looking out for one another and working together toward a common goal (Padilla). Rebecca opened up to me saying “acceptance, there’s so much of it, but so little of it at the same time” (Owen). She referred to the same ideas of family and community, but also to ethnic tensions and the resulting condescending attitudes she felt growing up on the island as a Caucasian. Julia also expressed that she felt very little acceptance growing up on Maui and felt out of place due to her fair skin and Caucasian ethnicity. Acceptance, in its dual form, shows up in all of my research participants’ reflections on Maui and resurfaces as an influence on their movement practices.

Ohana and the collective

All of my participants spoke about acceptance, or lack thereof, in connection to their families and extended families on Maui. Hokulani, who grew up immersed in the Native Hawaiian culture, shared with me the meaning and value of *ohana* to the Hawaiian people. From a young age she was taught that the family functions as a collective, and that moving forward together is of the utmost importance. For the Hawaiians, the collective ideals of working together as a group were first introduced in the family setting and were necessary to survive island life⁵ (Padilla). Her Hawaiian ancestors understood that if they all moved forward together, “the success of one would be the success of all” (Padilla). Out of this idea of the collective stems the extended-family definition of *ohana*. As a young child growing up, she experienced a

⁵ Hokulani spoke of the values and culture of the Hawaiian people as stemming from “island life” or being “island people:”

. . . the health of our environment is important to us because it is close and immediate to us. We cannot get water from any other state, we cannot get electricity from any other state, we cannot expand our land holdings to any other state. As an island, we need to live within the confines of our environment. In general, I think the belief in the earth or the land, provides us with all that we need spiritually, emotionally, and physically . . . I think those kinds of things that were ideals in our past are still good ideals for us today. (Hokulani)

familial belonging to more than just her immediate family resulting from the “willingness to open up one’s home” (Padilla). The warmth and welcome she felt from those who wanted to share their homes and lives with her, colored her childhood years. She continues to experience and perpetuate this hospitality today. She reflected, “what comes with being an island people is that your surroundings, including the people, are very close to you,” and therefore functioning as a collective as a greater Maui community is important to survival and happiness (Padilla).

The term *ohana* is famously used in the Disney animated movie *Lilo and Stitch*, depicting a Hawaiian family who adopts an alien. Many of the depictions of Hawaii in this movie bring to mind Jane Desmond’s essay, “Invoking the Native” in which Desmond talks about how hula’s role in the tourist industry reveals a complex relationship between body, identity, and performance practice (1). Desmond discusses how the Hawaii tourist industry plays to the “trope of a primitive paradise” using the image of a smiling, tan woman who wears a grass skirt, offers a lei, and dances hula (87). Her “friendliness, warmth, and generosity” reflect the Aloha Spirit for which Hawaii is so well known (87). Similarly, the animation portrays Hawaii as an overly idealized paradise that ignores much of the complex nature of Hawaii’s history, people, and island culture. However frustrating the stereotypes presented may be, the movie’s tag line “*ohana* means family, and family means no one gets left behind” (*Lilo and Stitch*) is surprisingly relevant to my experiences of *ohana* on Maui. The movie presents Hawaii’s definition of *ohana* and family as a value: “no one gets left behind” (*Lilo and Stitch*). This line directly reflects Hokulani’s sentiments about the importance of moving forward together as a collective so that all may prosper, a view that is at the center of David and Hallie’s experiences as well.

David, who moved to Maui when he was 25, said that he experienced a welcoming community from the day he arrived. He initially came to Maui intending to only stay for two

weeks to lead a series of dance workshops. He was serendipitously offered a job to direct the dance department at Seabury Hall High School and decided to make Maui his home. He quickly found himself immersed in the arts community and engaged in projects throughout Hawaii. He remembers feeling a “strong sense of community and *ohana*” (Ward) as he traveled throughout the island chain performing and offering various programs and dance classes. He quickly grew invested in the unique and culturally diverse community, which inspired him to learn and connect more deeply through collaboration. As he continued to reminisce, he added that he believes being an artist who was willing and eager to share his knowledge, learn about island life and culture, and engage with the community in a mutual way aided in this acceptance. David and Hokulani shared the belief that if you participate in island life by sharing something new or contributing as an active member in the community, “the community will take you in and accept you for all of who you are, including your faults and your strengths” (Ward). He told me how “Hawaii’s embrace made [him] feel like [he] was connected to something greater than [him]self” and how this keeps him rooted to the island to this day (Ward).

Hallie Hunt, who moved to Maui five years ago at the age of 21, also feels her roles as a dance teacher, performer, and choreographer offer unique frames of reference through which she perceives her sense of belonging in the Maui community. Hallie mainly surrounds herself with the students and parents at the Alexander Ballet Academy, and the members and board members of her new contemporary dance company, Adaptations Dance Theater (ADT). She immediately noticed a spirit of thankfulness in her students and in the audiences who watched her perform with ADT. She believes this thankfulness is related in part to her donation-based studio that allows anyone, regardless of economic situation, to participate in dance. She also noticed her Maui students’ “gentler” interactions and approach to dance training which she attributes, in part,

to the great level of comfort between the students and teachers. In her early training and professional dance employment in California, she recalled a highly competitive and judgmental environment. While she believes her experience of the accepting Maui community is a result of many things, she also believes it is a response to her desire to open herself up and share her love and immense knowledge of dance with the Maui community. This mutual exchange of giving and receiving relates back to Hokulani's idea of the importance of reciprocity between people—relying on one another and moving forward together. Hallie says she's been revitalized by the dance community's thankfulness and warmth, and therefore strives to be her best self for the betterment of her students and audiences.

The experiences of my five research participants, collectively, provide a glimpse into the complex nature of *aloha* and how it functions on the island of Maui. Some people experience overwhelming acceptance and warmth like David and Hallie, while others experience condescending attitudes and feelings of not belonging that result from ethnic tensions on the island. My participants never used the words *aloha* or Aloha Spirit in any of our conversations, nor did I draw the connection between their experiences and *aloha* until I came across the Hawaiian phrase *aloha kanaka* which means “the love of one's fellow human beings” (Ohnuma, “Aloha Spirit” 376). I then began to see how Hallie and David's practice of *aloha* in their value of interpersonal relationships and contributing to the community resulted in their greater sense of belonging within the larger Maui community.

I did not initially connect my participants' individual experiences of acceptance with the idea of *aloha* because of my own biases toward the word and what I believe it represents—a superficial yet ubiquitous marketing slogan that disenfranchises residents of Hawaii in the attempt to define a homogenous Hawaii experience that can be sold. The root word *aloha* can be

found throughout Polynesia (*alofa* in Samoan, *aroha* in Maori, etc.) meaning love, compassion, sympathy or kindness (Ohnuma, “Aloha Spirit” 367). In Hawaii, “[*aloha*’s] earliest recorded uses emphasized “love of kin,” which included ancestors” (367). In Hawaii, “. . . *aloha* is also used in expressions that describe the welcome that should be extended to strangers” (367).

In my experience, the Maui *aloha* does emanate a warmth and welcome, but also encompasses complex interactions between residents of the island that can either be empowering, disenfranchising, accepting, or isolating. As a fair skinned Local, I grew up experiencing this prejudice to a certain extent, but suppressed my resentment for fear of drawing more attention to my whiteness. The few times a year I return home, I experience feelings of disorientation and self-consciousness from this unique culture and Local tension, which I will discuss in depth later in this paper. I feel the anxiety of wishing I was Hawaiian so I could blend in and claim ownership of the only place I’ve ever called home, resentment toward those who hindered my ability to feel like I could fit in to the Maui community, and frustration at the fact that I still am unable to reconcile this inner turmoil. In the next section of this paper I will begin to reveal *aloha*’s deeper implications by sharing Julia and Becca’s stories of disorientation stemming from the very same community Hallie and David found so welcoming.

***Aloha*’s Flipside**

In the article “Invoking the Native,” author Jane Desmond discusses how the Native Hawaiian image is constructed and sold to the mainland by the tourist industry on O’ahu. She states, “tourism’s success demands that islanders must be encountered in the process of doing things deemed culturally specific or defining” (105). She goes on to explain that white mainlanders who vacation on O’ahu expect and want to experience a “brown body” (not white,

black or Japanese) performing the hula because this alignment between “bodily look and performative practice produces a guarantee of authenticity” (105). Desmond states that for residents of the islands, there is a similar, yet “complex relationship between bodies and actions when it comes to producing ‘evidence’ of membership in social categories” (105). For Julia and Becca, having tanned skin was a vital piece of “evidence” they were unable to provide to verify their Local identity. In my interview with Julia, she recalled how she would burn her skin at the beach in the attempt to appear more tan. She believed that if she tanned her skin, she would be more accepted and thereby gain a deeper sense of belonging to Maui. I too have experienced that being tan is important to Locals and often serves as a key to the legitimization of one’s Local identity and feelings of acceptance on Maui.

Julia recalled to me that her inability to “pass” as Local or Hawaiian because of her fair skin has led to an increased and ever present awareness of what it means to be Caucasian living on Maui. Starting from a very young age, she felt like she had to carefully navigate where she could fit in on Maui. She recalled dancing for a hula *halau* as a kindergartner but feeling embarrassed because of her skin color, feeling like she was drawing attention to herself as the “glowing white girl” (Cost). She cited another example from her elementary school years where she recalled a clear division between the Local and *haole* kids. Those who looked *haole* longed to look “more” like their Local classmates. She clung to the fact that she was born and raised on Maui because it made her a “Local.” When I followed up with Julia two months later at her beautiful home in Upcountry Maui, she said that she still feels the need to prove herself when she returns home. She recalled that just the day before, she encountered a resident who spoke to her in a *pidgin* accent and how she felt the strong need to respond in a way that proved she knew

how to relate.⁶ I sensed Julia's frustration and resentment at the fact that she was still pursuing her sense of belonging on Maui.

Rebecca, who is Maui-born, also expressed that her fair skin was one of the biggest signifiers that made people think she was an outsider. She recounted, "when people look at me they think I am a transplant" (Owen). She said her experience of Hawaii's acceptance has often been initially based on the color of one's skin, which can be indicative of where you came from or the type of life you lead on Maui. White skin can represent that you are an outsider or from the mainland, or it can mean that you do not participate in island life by going to the beach, or surfing, or paddling, as taking part in the opportunities found in nature is important to the Hawaiian people. However, even though she *looks* like she doesn't belong, she said that she believes that one can earn the respect and trust of the community over time, and be accepted just as she has been. She explained that by being humble and willing to contribute to the Maui community, she feels she has proven that she shares the Local mentality valued by the people of Maui. Although she experienced this ethnic and racial tension, she feels that Maui is, for the most part, an accepting place.

Rebecca's value for humility connects with Hokulani's notions of the symbiotic, cooperative, and mutual relationships on the island. Hokulani told me that she feels uncomfortable when people start to focus on "me, me, me . . . I, I, I" (Padilla) because it is a form of exclusivity which goes against the Hawaiian values of community, inclusivity, and family. She said difficulties do arise when people come to the islands with a self-oriented, selfish mentality because it clashes with the long held communal value people on the island honor and strive to uphold to this day.

⁶ Pidgin is Hawaiian-creole language based in part on English and used by many of the residents of Hawaii.

Such derogatory descriptors as “selfish” are, in my experience, linked to the *haole* identity. The word *haole* is a pejorative term, which translates to “without breath” and is usually used to refer to ignorant, rude, and standoffish White visitors (Miyares 517). Stores that sell Hawaiian apparel, such as the popular Maui Built, have tried to neutralize the term by selling shirts that read “*HAOLE*” in bold and are encouraged to be worn with pride. However, I continue to experience people who use the word as a racial slur and to create a power hierarchy of who can belong. Therefore, it feels like being white, even if you were born and raised in Hawaii, comes with a stigma that precedes one’s character and requires one to earn acceptance. The issue of white-skinned residents, such as Julia, who feel like they have never and will never be able to fit in can be explained through the historical and evolving construction of the Local identity.

Darell Lum, author of “What School You Went? Local Culture, Local Identity, and Local Language: Stories of Schooling in Hawaii,” paraphrases Jonathan Okamura in saying “the local culture has been defined largely by what it was *against* and by who didn’t belong rather than by those who did” (8). During the plantation days, the laborers banded together in resistance against their white plantation bosses, while today, “Locals” on Maui band together to resist over-development, especially in regard to tourism, and the large influx of tourists and immigrants who come to Hawaii (7). Because I grew up in the Local culture as a Local *hapa haole*, I have had to endure snide remarks from fellow classmates who would say, “go to the beach” in a way that meant “you don’t belong here,” which made me feel bad for being white. Although seemingly insignificant, the repetitive undercutting comments from my peers were the most hurtful. I have therefore, felt the need to “prove” my “Local-ness” by exaggerating my

ability to relate to pidgin or Maui island culture. Julia and Rebecca have had to similarly navigate their Local identity to prove they weren't *haole*'s ignorant to Maui culture.

David and Hallie also acknowledged that a tension exists on the island, but that it has not been their main experience. Hallie revealed, "I think it would be really hard to live here and *not* see it, feel it, or experience it in some way" (Hunt). However, she also told me that she believes that anywhere you go, you will experience clashes of all sorts, whether it's about family, money, land, race, *etc.* She said she experienced culture and social clashes all the time in San Francisco but chose to celebrate all of the differences rather than take offense. She has a similar approach in Hawaii, but really feels her main experience of the Maui community is of acceptance and support.

When I asked David if he had ever experienced an ethnic or Local tension on the island he acknowledged that those who "want to do for the community, and who love the land...those are the people that are accepted here" (Ward). For him, surrendering himself to the culture and people on Maui lead to a deeper personal connection to the place and moved him to continue his dance work in the islands. Even though David did not explicitly reveal any personal anecdotes dealing with issues of acceptance and being white, his statement above reveals his awareness of how to fit-in in Hawaii.

This flipside of *aloha* is shocking to many of my mainland peers and colleagues with whom I have shared my research. Their perception of Hawaii mostly comes from a singular point of reference—the tourist industry. Therefore they only know the definition of *aloha* that represents Hawaii as a welcoming, beautiful vacation destination. Keiko Ohnuma, in her article "Aloha Spirit and the Cultural Politics of Sentiment as National Belonging," poignantly points out:

[*aloha*] has served to obscure a history of traumatic meanings, all carrying political investments that remain hidden beneath the seemingly transparent universality of such private sentiments as love and kindness. As such Aloha Spirit continues to serve as both social lubricant and glue, sticking people together while deflecting attention from the problems of proximity. (366)

Aloha is often a political and manipulative tool used to smooth over a history of cultural and political contest that has yet to be resolved (366). This includes bridging the gaps between the many cultures and ethnicities coexisting on the islands (366).

The problem with this flipside of *aloha* is that it opts to conceal rather than address the problems at hand. As a result, these issues of racial tension persist on Maui today. My biggest problem with *aloha*, however, is that it gives all people who live in Hawaii, especially those who were born there, a social guideline that, when adhered to, yields a sense of belonging, and when challenged, results in feelings of exclusion. Ohnuma points out that “not only does [*aloha*] point . . . toward the things closest to people’s hearts—family, church, nation—but it also does so in a way that is understood to be uniquely Hawaiian, to ‘belong to Hawaii’” (366). Therefore, not practicing *aloha* is to *not* belong to Hawaii.

I believe the practice of *aloha* represents the “action” aspect of Jane Desmond’s study of the performance of “Hawaiianess” in her article “Invoking the Native.” Desmond suggests “to ‘be’ to ‘look’ and to ‘act’ are three interrelated components of this public display [of Hawaiianess] that must be analyzed in relation to each other” (85). While Desmond uses these three components to understand the tourists’ construction of an authentic cultural body, I can see its importance as applied to the Local body and its corresponding acceptance, or lack thereof, within the community. In my personal experience on Maui, “to be” means to be Hawaiian or of Polynesian ethnicity, “to look” means to have the brown/tanned body, and “to act” is to practice the values and culture of Maui. Julia, Rebecca, and I are only able to prove our Local identity

through our actions. Julia and Rebecca both expressed a heightened awareness of how they “act” Local by embodying the Spirit of Aloha in practicing respect and harmony between people, being aware of how the culture on the island functions (being aware of ethnic tensions), and navigating these tensions in a way that doesn’t “make waves.” The Local mentality of *aloha* consists of a broad spectrum that encompasses a complex, racial tension on one end and a vibrant, welcoming community on the other; correspondingly, this experience is an underlying influence for all of my research participants’ movement practices.

CHAPTER 3

EXPERIENCE, IDENTITY, & INFLUENCE

In her article “An Anthropologist looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance,” dance anthropologist Joann Keali’inohomoku, states that “all forms of dance reflect the cultural-traditions within which they developed” (33). Even though contemporary dance did not develop in Hawaii, I developed my dance practice on Maui, a unique place that I believe has informed my movement aesthetic. My research participants also point to many of their Maui experiences as being influential on their choreography, teaching, artistry, or approach to dance. Most salient are their shared experiences of the cultural practice of *aloha* and how it has informed their artistic values. Rebecca, David, and Hallie’s experience of *aloha*’s accepting, warm embrace is reflected through their value of community in their dance practice. Conversely, Julia’s experience of *aloha*’s flipside is reflected in her ambivalence about Maui’s influence on her choreography. In this chapter, the importance of the cultural practice of *aloha*, in its duality, is made clear through its relationship to experience and influence for these Maui dance practitioners.

Rebecca Owen expressed, many times, the importance of perpetuating community through her dance company. First, Rebecca has brought together five generations of dancers who she never would have thought would share the same the stage, all who are united by their dance practice and choice to live on Maui. Second, she has created a yearly concert series of work she deems “accessible” in order to bring together the Maui community from all parts of the island. Lastly, she stressed the meaningfulness of an audience that is personally invested in and connected to the dancers on stage, a meaningfulness she cultivates through choreographic works

that are personal reflections of her dancers. Rebecca's value for people and community is the catalyst that drives her dance company and choreographic content.

David Ward also spoke about the Aloha Spirit as influential on his dance practice in two significant ways: First, David was immediately drawn to Maui's culturally diverse community and was inspired to connect with and learn from dance artists of all genres. One of his projects *Dance Quake* was created to highlight and celebrate the talent and cultural diversity of Maui's dance community. Second, David believes that, in terms of accessibility to his audience, the themes and tone of his artistic work has grown to be more generous since moving to Maui. Rather than creating work that is "austere or self-serving," David aims to bring conversation to difficult topics and issues in a way that asks "what can we do to help?" (Ward). David's awareness and consideration of Maui's community continues to influence his role as a dance educator and artist today.

Hallie believes that her new role as a teacher and creator of dance, and the resulting dance community she surrounds herself with on Maui has helped her to reconcile her inner struggles with being a dancer. She says she has come closer to finding peace with herself as a dance artist. When Hallie lived in San Francisco, she believed that in order to be a dancer there was a certain level of "obsession" that needed to occur in order to achieve the level of physical and mental perfection necessary to "make it" in the dance world. She recounted how she was neurotic about her diet and workouts, and how she was always stretching and going over choreography. She lost a sense of balance in her life and slowly grew to be unhappy. Teaching dance on Maui to such a thankful community opened her eyes to see that there are many valid and honest ways to approach dance. Altering the emphasis in dance that she placed solely on

herself to include giving to a community of supporters, allowed her to find balance and peace in her dance practice.

In summary, Rebecca, David, and Hallie share the value of cultivating and giving to the community through their dance practice, which connects back to their individual Maui experiences expressed in Chapter 2. Rebecca and David find beauty in being connected to others and have strived to incorporate this into their projects and artistic endeavors. Hallie, who has only been living on Maui for five years, has been touched deeply by the Maui community and in turn is eager to serve the community through her teaching, choreography, and performance. The value of *aloha* is highlighted in these three artists' Maui experience and movement practice, and connects back to Hokulani's notions of island living as a reciprocal process between the land and people. This harmonious interplay of experience, influence, and *aloha* for David, Hallie, and Rebecca however, is fraught with ambivalence for Julia Cost who is conflicted about Maui's role in shaping her choreographic practice.

Julia Cost: A Look at One Maui-born Dance Artist's Work

Julia does not believe that any one aspect of her Maui experiences has been significant enough to largely influence the work she creates. When talking about her work, she said that it is:

. . . autobiographical, it is about being young and trying to figure out who you are and where you're going, and trying to connect with people along the way, and making misconnections and having great moments of revelations and small moments of satisfaction inside of a larger feeling of disorientation. (Cost)

She believes there are so many factors that have influenced her work that pinpointing anything directly to Maui would be a stretch for her. A major influence on her choreographic work that she does not attribute to Maui is her other artistic practice, painting.

When I walked into Julia's house on Maui for our second interview, I immediately noticed the large, beautiful paintings covering the wall. Both Julia and her father are painters; her father is a renowned landscape artist on the island. Julia has often been told that her choreography feels like a moving painting, composed across a stage in a two-dimensional way. What I find intriguing is that while her dad's work on Maui mostly consists of capturing the essence of the Maui landscape and natural environment, Julia is interested in painting *people*. Of her paintings hanging on the wall, I remember seeing a hula dancer, mid-twirl, in a bright red traditional hula outfit, and dancers who have participated in her pieces. Despite Julia's hesitancy in claiming Maui's influence on her choreographic work, her value for people and creating and cherishing relationships became evident in our interview as a major influence on her painting as well as her dance work. This theme resonates with the values of *ohana* and *aloha* that are the undercurrent influences for all of my research participants.

Julia greatly considers her audience and dancers in creating choreographic work, reflecting her keen awareness and value for people. For her audiences, she aims to make work that speaks to the human experience; she wants the work to remain open so that the viewers can find a strand of their own experience to relate to in some way. As a choreographer, Julia values the choreographic process of learning about herself and her dancers more deeply:

Going through a journey with these people is what I'm really after. Getting to know them and getting to grow together is the only reason why I make dance. It's not because I want box office, or to be rich, or for fame, fortune, or other crazy ideals of having a piece on stage. I'm not doing it for the review. I'm doing it for the process and the meaningfulness of that. (Cost)

Julia values human experience at every stage in her process in hopes of empowering her audience, her dancers, and herself.

Julia not only aims to uplift people as individuals through her work, but she also aims to create community through her creative process. When we spoke about her choreographic work *9 Shards and Other Bits* she said she values knowing her dancers before working with them in order to build strong relationships. In this choreographic work in particular, she said she felt like she created a community, a sense of home, with her dancers that resulted in a serenity and sweetness throughout the work. Even though Julia's experience of Maui consisted of feelings of exclusion because of her white skin, her emphasis on community and relationships are still present as an important driving factor at every stage of her choreographic process and connects to the significance of community in Rebecca, David, and Hallie's dance practices as well.

Julia has reservations about making broad generalizations about how Maui has influenced her choreography. I reiterated to her that I wasn't trying to prove or classify all dance from Hawaii as the same; rather I was interested in how each of my five research participants believed Maui had influenced them personally. She reflected that her work might have a tendency toward sweetness and quietness because of her upbringing in a place that doesn't have roaring traffic and city life; she said, "maybe it *is* something to do with Maui. I'm compelled towards things that are spacious and have room to think in them, that aren't too over stimulating" (Cost). Still, she was uncomfortable attributing anything in her work as directly influenced by Maui. Instead, she offered:

I think that there is something to be said about the fact that I grew up on 5 acres of stunning property up in Kula, and that I didn't have a T.V., and that I grew up in a house full of art supplies. I grew up in a place where creativity was very valued. There is a dreamy quality that is probably related to the amount of dreaming, imagination, and quiet, alone time that I had as a kid on this property. I think I have a love for nature
(Cost)

My Observations of Julia's Aesthetic

Julia feels that “Maui is not important” as a major influence on her work. However, after watching performance footage of her choreography and listening to and observing her during our interviews, I see multiple connections between her Maui experiences, *ohana*, *aloha*, and her aesthetic, process, and intentions within her movement practice.

Julia's aesthetic “incorporates planned spatial composition and an overall feeling of expansiveness,” which she relates mainly to her painting practice and resulting obsession with imagery (Cost). However as I stood on the porch of her house, which overlooks a stunning view of Maui, I could not believe that this vibrancy and calm had not touched her.

In her thesis concert work, *9 shards and other bits*, I observed her work to be playful and nostalgic. I wondered if this nostalgia harkens back to her experiences as a child growing up on the stunning property I visited during our interview. In the beginning of the piece, people enter the stage one by one, not acknowledging the other dancers on the stage, but lost in their own idiosyncratic gestures and tasks. Even though the movement quality of the eight dancers ranges from quick neurotic gestures to luxurious postural movements, there is a calming quality to watching them advance toward and retreat away from one another and as they weave throughout the space. Julia's aesthetic focus on a community of unique individuals, which is expanded upon through various solos, duets, and group work, and her desire to build community during the creation process, which I discussed in the previous section, reminded me of the way Rebecca, David, and Hallie valued community.

Throughout the work, there is a steady ebb and flow in the dancers' movement quality, interactions, and transitions. Nothing ever seems to truly end, but rather trail off into the distance. This relates to what I believe to be the “of Hawaii” aesthetic, which I will discuss in

chapter four. When I watch Julia's choreographic work, I see undefined edges marked by a blending from one scene to the next, and a sense of ease and control even in the segments Julia described as "chaotic."

I saw a pattern of balance in terms of formations on the stage as well as in the physical performance of the dancers. In one section of her performance, a female dancer balances on one leg for 8 minutes and later in the performance, another female balances off center, hanging on a rope, as she improvises in a dreamlike way. This literal use of balance is enhanced by the visual anchors presented throughout the performance (*ie.* set pieces, and isolated, powerful solos). This reminded me of Hokulani's ideas of how Maui's landscape influences hula dancers from Maui:

Here on Maui I believe we have a lot of differences. We have a shield volcano on one side and mountains and valleys on the other. On the other side of the smooth mountain we have mountains and valleys as well. So there are big balances, or differences that occur on this island. We have a lot of wind because of how our island was created. So for me we are between the two, Hawaii and O'ahu, that we have a kind of earthy-ness that is also balanced with a kind of strength because you have to withstand this wind. (Padilla)

Julia's use of balances and anchors throughout her work asserts a strength and organization that is reminiscent to me, of Maui's unique ecology.

Julia does not create work specifically about Maui, but her work feels very personal. She has often received feedback that her work seems autobiographical. Her questions about who she is and where she can fit in is a question of many youth and young adults; however, the unique prejudices she had to endure growing up on Maui magnifies her questions of identity and continues to haunt her to this day. *9 shards and other bits* has a forward motion to it, a searching, accumulating and shedding people and props along the way, constantly building to a final picture and seeming revelation, before slowly melting away into the darkness. I see Julia's questioning of Maui, identity, beauty, and belonging permeate every aspect of her dance making and process—especially themes, aesthetic, and intention.

Final Thoughts on Julia

I observed and noted Julia's reluctance to give Maui any credit in shaping her as a choreographer in our first interview. In our second interview, it became more apparent that Julia associated her experience with dance on Maui with feelings of frustration, resentment, and discontent with her body and dancing. In California, however, being a choreographer has been "one of the most empowering experiences" for her (Cost). This drastic dichotomy between her association with dance on Maui versus in California was emphasized many times during our interviews and helped me to empathize with why she wouldn't want her disenchanting experiences on Maui to taint her feelings of empowerment as a choreographer in California.

Julia's Maui experiences outside of dance are similarly fraught with the struggle to fit a certain mold and resulting feelings of inadequacy; she wasn't tan, wasn't Hawaiian, and wasn't the ideal dancer for the small dance community on Maui. She spoke to me at length about these feelings with a heaviness and sadness that I could relate to. I wondered if Julia's inability to entertain the possibility that Maui had influenced her work, was her way of keeping her feelings of empowerment as a choreographer in California sacred and untainted.

I sensed a pure joy and happiness in Julia as she proudly showed me video after video of her choreography. She told me, "I think you can tell me better how/if Maui is reflected through my work better than I would be able to" (Cost). I witnessed a generosity, openness, and warmth in all aspects of her work that remind me of my home, Maui and the values, hardships, and growth I experienced living there. It would appear to me that Julia uses her movement practice to investigate the issues of identity and self that the Maui *aloha* has created, and by doing so, she might be slowly reconciling her two vastly different worlds, bringing them together in harmony.

CHAPTER 4

SETTLING INTO BELONGING: MY CHOREOGRAPHIC AND INTELLECTUAL JOURNEY TO UNDERSTANDING

When I think of home I think of standing on the lanai of my house and looking out at Haleakala, Maui's shield volcano to the east. It's morning and the sun is warm on my face, it's already 80 degrees and extremely humid. I look out upon a beautiful palette of blues, greens, and dark reds that define the volcano as it slopes into the sparkling Kahului Harbor. I can smell the damp grass and stiff ocean breeze. This setting was the background of my eighteen years on Maui, full of family gatherings, birthdays, reunions, dance performances, and so much more. This view is the first thing I long for every time I return home. Recalling and describing Haleakala from my desk in California evokes a rush of nostalgia for all the comforts Maui brings me. This landmark simultaneously serves as an important aesthetic experience of Maui for me as well as a visible symbol of my sense of identity and belonging to Maui.

My feelings of rooted-ness in Maui, the place, is the reason why my aesthetic experience of Maui surfaces so prominently in my movement practice. In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, author Yi-Fu Tuan, a Chinese-American geographer known for his study of humanist geography, discusses attachment to homeland as a common human emotion:

A homeland has its landmark . . . these visible signs serve to enhance a people's sense of identity; they encourage awareness of and loyalty to place . . . Attachment of a deep though subconscious sort may come simply with familiarity and ease, with the assurance of nurture and security, with the memory of sounds and smells, of communal activities and homely pleasures accumulated over time. (159)

My landmark on Maui that evokes a sense of home, comfort, rootedness, and loyalty is this view of Haleakala from the front porch of my house.

The Hawaiian people also have a deep appreciation and value for Haleakala for many reasons. Haleakala, which means "house of the sun," is 1.1 million years old and is responsible

for forming 75% of the island, Maui. In Hawaiian legend, Haleakala's crater is home to Hina, the mother of the demigod Maui, who snared the sun in order to make the days longer to fulfill the needs of man. Once, I accompanied a good friend of mine who is Native Hawaiian, to Haleakala where I witnessed him *oli* (chant) to receive spiritual wisdom from the Hawaiian Gods. Haleakala is sacred to the Hawaiians and has similarly evoked a deep reverence from within me.

In my interview with Hokulani, she spoke about the unique-ness of Hawaii's mountains and volcanoes:

Yes every place has mountains, but not every mountain is Mauna Kea, and not every mountain is Haleakala, and not every mountain is like Hawaii's mountains. Yes, there are oceans everywhere but if the poets or the composers of these *mele* were inspired by *this* place, then to me, you must come to *this* place to receive the full inspiration for the hula. (Padilla)

Hokulani's emphasis on the importance of experiencing and drawing from the land in order to cultivate embodied inspiration and deeper understanding of the *mele*⁷ and gestures of the hula, points to a larger relationship between environment, people, and experience. In "Environment and the Arts," a multi-author collection of articles, Arnold Berleant, an American scholar and author whose books focus on the philosophy of aesthetics, environmental aesthetics, and ethics, emphasizes that appreciation for the environment is not just a visual perception and interpretation of our physical surroundings and landscapes (10). He states, "the conscious body does not observe the world contemplatively but participates actively in the experiential process" (10). In the hula, the dancer's experience of the site of inspiration through all the body's senses is paramount to the meaningful and respectful execution of the *mele* and dance (Padilla).

⁷ The *mele* is the poetry and foundation for the hula. The *mele* is often based on an important place or person in Hawaii and is chanted or sung. The gestures for the hula are derived from the *mele*. (Hokulani Interview)

Berleant expands upon embodied experience by adding “aesthetic valuation is not a personal experience . . . but a social one” (11). He states:

In engaging aesthetically with environment as with art, the knowledge, beliefs, opinions and attitudes we have that are an inseparable part of the experience are largely social, cultural, and historical in origin. These direct our attention; they open or close us to what is happening and prepare or impede our participation. (11)

My appreciation of Maui’s physical surroundings is an extension of the Maui community’s value of the *‘aina* (land) and has largely influenced the values and aesthetics imbued in my choreography and movement style; there is a generosity, rippling, and silk like quality that I attribute to the swaying palm trees and rolling ocean waves. Even the erect mountains and sand seem to have a quality of giving in and passing through from place to place that evokes a sense of motion. I grew up surrounded by a community that believed that “the land is able to provide its people with all they need spiritually, emotionally, and physically” (Hokulani); And I continue to be attuned to how I physically, emotionally, and intellectually respond to the island every time I return and how those qualities linger in my body even when I am away.

Choreography as Research

Throughout my choreographic process, I have been investigating the idea of “flow” in my work and how this aesthetic might be rooted in my Maui experience. The flow in my choreography most often tends towards a combination of movement that 1) moves sequentially and wave-like through each joint and limb, and tends toward full body involvement, 2) begins in the center of the body and successively travels to the body’s extremities, 3) carves through a voluminous space and incorporates an internal to external awareness, and 4) unfolds smoothly in a sustained time. This aesthetic is connected and smooth, yielding and gooey, gradual and

prolonging, and emphasizes the performer's visual awareness and a connection to internal happenings as it manifests through the body.

In my first rehearsal I began exploring one particular question: If my sensorial memories of Maui have manifested in my tendency toward this unique flow, then would these same qualities be reproducible in dancers who are not from Hawaii? I provided my four dancers with a list of prompts inspired by memory fragments that related strongly to my childhood. Some of the prompts included:

1. look into the horizon
2. run your hands under a waterfall
3. Pull headlice from your head
4. Paint a water color palm tree
5. Make a lei

I asked them to separate into different parts of the room to create a series of hand gestures that embodied these prompts. As I sat on the side and observed them, I was amazed at how all four dancers immediately developed the flow I was looking for. Perhaps, they shaped their movements in a particular way because they knew I was exploring the “of Hawaii” aesthetic. Or maybe the reasons for which I chose them—their natural flowing movement quality and ability to physicalize their internal motivations outward—yielded a stylistic aesthetic I tended toward.

Later, when I spoke to them about their mindset in creating these gestures, two of the dancers said they imagined themselves experiencing the prompt. They thought about how it would feel, how they would react, what it would look like, and the motivation behind their action. My other two dancers took a slightly different approach in that they tried to embody an image derived from the prompt. For example, they drew awareness to their arm as a representation of a line of a waterfall. The manifestation of all four dancers' internal awareness moving outward to experience or shape their body according to the prompt produced a

connection between their internal thoughts and feelings, and their external body in a gradual, discovery-like way reminiscent of my Maui flow. These prompts became the foundation of my piece in that it provided a shared language for mutual understanding of quality, feeling, and intention.

At the start of this process I did not believe my dancers would be able to reflect Maui in the same, personal way I would because they are not from Hawaii. However, over the course of this four-month process, I found that they looked as if they were reflecting my personal experiences and feelings about Hawaii in a meaningful way. They showed me that I reflect Maui not only through my choreographic aesthetic, but also in the way I value people, community, and process. My four dancers have reflected my personal relationship with *aloha* with a great deal of honesty and care, offering me a fresh perspective in place of my previous disenchantment with the idea of *aloha* influencing my work.

This research has allowed me to confront my issues of identity as someone who has moved away from Maui but still identifies as a resident of that place. My desire to reflect Maui stems from similar experiences Julia recounted; I loved the place but I never could quite fit in because I was too white. I struggle with my identity, sense of self, and sense of belonging when I go back home to visit and continue to grapple with who I am and where I belong. Many young people grapple with issues of identity; I have listened as my friends express similar insecurities about who they are and who they want to become. However, my issues with being young are complicated by the fact that I do not know where I am allowed to be from.

Through this research I hoped to find that my movement quality was another “action” that could help me claim my Maui roots. I wanted to discover a profound and explicit connection between the way I move and choreograph, and the Hawaiian culture. I still believe

Maui has influenced the way I move but I was reminded of something far more valuable; Maui has influenced me beyond my physical body to include an emotional and intellectual connection to the island, my childhood, and all of my *ohana* who live there. When I began this study I was preoccupied with the beauty of Maui's landscape and Maui's *physical* features. Similarly, I was interested in how it influenced my physicality as a dancer and mover, how it influenced my choreographic aesthetic. This extended to my hope that my research participants also believed that their Maui experience manifested through their body. I have been preoccupied with the physical my whole childhood on Maui, constantly thinking "I'm not tan enough," "why am I so white?" "I wish I looked Hawaiian." My myopic focus on the external continued to silence my intuition urging me to penetrate this outer layer to find a deeper connection.

In my thesis concert piece, I aim to reveal *my* Maui reality through a performance event that strips away the glamour, allure, and lust associated with Hawaii in order to ponder the meaning of community in its endless manifestations. In the past two quarters, my dancers and I have focused on connection. We have explored being physically connected to one another, but also being emotionally connected to the larger ideas of community, *ohana*, and *aloha* on Maui. The four solos in the piece are my dancers' interpretation and embodiment of the experiences and stories of my research participants. Much of my group work displays my experience of different relationship dynamics on Maui and how my four dancers, as unique individuals, can connect with one another. There is no unison work in my choreography and my dancers must have an ever-present awareness of one another in order for the piece to continue forward. The emphasis throughout the work, even during the solos, is about relying on and relating to one another.

I cannot ignore the aesthetic quality of this performance event, which I would describe through the experience of watching a sunset. There is a soft, meditative quality, and a patience that is required of the viewer to witness its full impact. The piece begins with each dancer performing a series of gestures and postural movements derived from the prompts I discussed earlier. Each experience gradually ebbs and flows into the next, reminiscent of natural tides. The rest of the piece expands on these initial gestures to include duets and group work, which I would describe aesthetically using the words rippling, gliding, melting, and growing. Structurally, the segments flow from one to the next until the “end” of the piece where the final thought is left lingering for the audience to ponder. I want my audience to experience this piece as they would a sunset, with a mindfulness and in-the-moment presence that allows for the appreciation of a slow-moving beauty that gradually unfolds and lingers as it fades away.

My work reflects Joann Keali’ inohomoku’s theory that “all dance reflects the culture in which it was developed . . . ” (33) and includes updated concepts now well known in dance studies and accepted by most cultural theorists that is, “dance has the potential to embody new ideas.”⁸ My work reflects my Maui experience, which includes my fascination with physicality and aesthetic as it pertains to flow. It also reflects my values of community and meaningful connection, which permeate my collaborative process and manifests through my dancers’ movements and the structure of the piece. The intellectual and social stimulation as well as the culture I have experienced living in California for seven years has inspired a new lens through which I can view myself, building new layers upon my Maui foundation. However, my question of what it means to be the “girl from Hawaii” will continue to be one with which I grapple. I

⁸ I thank Professor Jennifer Fisher for introducing me to both reflection and creation theory of dance, as expressed in the essay by Sally Banes - “Power and the Dancing Body” (Banes, Sally. "Power and the Dancing Body." *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1994. N. 43. Print.).

have gained a stronger idea of who I am; however, through this research, I have also realized and come to terms with the fact that the representation of myself, how other people see me, is overpowering to my own definition of “self.”

In Hawaii and in California, I fear that people view me as an outsider. In Hawaii, I look like I am a mainlander/tourist and in California I am “the girl from Hawaii.” On Maui, I always make sure to show my Hawaii driver’s license as evidence of proof that I am “Local.” However, in California I dread showing my Hawaii license and listening to people earnestly exclaim “ooh, *shakaaaaa*” (with an exaggerated wagging shaka hand sign). Because of the tumultuous racial and colonial history of Hawaii, I feel uncomfortable being a ubiquitous representation of Hawaii. In California, I fear that people project onto me their ideas and notions of Hawaii and how it has influenced me, and on Maui, I fear am not Local/Hawaiian/Polynesian “enough” to be from there. In both cases I feel a tremendous amount of pressure to be something that is not truly me. Through this research I have begun to balance my idea of self with the representation of how others might view me. I have also begun to shed some of my fears engrained in me as a young child and reinforced in to adulthood, to gain understanding and confidence that I do reflect Maui, and I *can* belong.

Lingering Questions for the Future

I began this research aiming to investigate how people from Maui embody difference through their movement practice. I was inspired by Jane Desmond’s article “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies” where she argues that there is “much to be gained by opening up cultural studies to kinesthetic semiotics and by placing dance research (and by extension human movement studies) on the agenda of cultural studies” (1). By doing so,

Desmond believes that “we can analyze how social identities are signaled, formed and negotiated through bodily movement” (1). She laments, “given the amount of information the public display of movement provides, its scholarly isolation . . . is . . . remarkable . . .” (31).

For the future of this research, I am interested in moving beyond social mentality in Hawaii to analysis at the level of the body. I am interested in exploring the larger implications of dance in Hawaii on social categorization, identity, and acceptance by employing Desmond’s notions of dance as a “. . . process and product—between when, where, and how we dance, with whom, under what conditions—and what gets danced, whether on the stage in the street, or at a party?” (2). I have lingering questions about the role, place, and meaning of dance in Hawaii and how the movement of the body in the islands can point toward the larger issues and possible reconciliation of the fragmentation many Hawaii residents experience.

This thesis is an important precursor to my future research in that it has drawn my awareness to my dual insider/outsider identity in Hawaii and resulting biases that might cloud my ability to perceive meaning with clarity and minimal subjectivity. I have begun to reconcile some of my own issues of identity and fragmentation in living on Maui as a Caucasian and have also found value in my preliminary questioning and investigation of my body’s enactment of my cultural upbringing in Hawaii. I had not originally intended for this research to unfold in such a personal way, focusing on my experience, mentality, and identity juxtaposed with my five dance artists individual perspectives. However, remaining open to the natural progression and direction of my research has brought my attention to my deep interest in people, the lived experience, and the implications of the body and dance in the formation of a person’s sense of belonging and self knowing. Through this study, I have gained a new awareness of the lack of critical discourse engaging the movement of the body and cultural meaning, and am eager to contribute to the

emerging scholarship of the critical and cultural theorists referenced in this paper, who ground their work in dance.

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