Hula in the Diaspora: Adapting to Continental Environments

Uilani Bobbitt
University of Hawaii at Manoa, Spalding Hall 252, 2450 Maile Way, 96822 Honolulu, United States of America
dannie@hawaii.edu

Hula as a global art form acquires new meaning when we acknowledge the wide-ranging mobility of the art and the vast distances it has traveled from its roots in Hawai‘i. Understanding “place” as an element that shapes Hawaiian identity, hula constructs new identities informed by these places in which it is practiced, thus allowing for its continued survival. Hula has an inalienable connection to ʻāina (land), drawing its inspiration, its poetic images, and its resources from its surrounding environment. This environment is crucial, for example, to the proper adornment of performing dancers in specific types of fresh foliage to invoke Laka, a deity of hula. Hula characteristically reflects the surroundings in which it lives and is perpetuated. Hula that moves beyond Hawai‘i, therefore, may be as diverse as the continental environments in which it is practiced and may thrive outside of a Hawaiian environment and in a modern global world because hula adapts to its surroundings. The statistics documenting dozens of hula schools in Europe, hundreds in North America, and over a thousand in Japan, reflect the agency and creativity of Hawaiians in developing and sustaining a global culture of hula. This successful adaptation of hula beyond Hawai‘i’s beaches has been steadily developing over the past few decades and is slowly being recognized as a viable vehicle in which to globally market both hula as well as Hawaiian music in general. This paper focuses on the ways in which hula adapts to its host environment as a model for a path that the greater culture must also follow. With the intense level of socio-economic changes in this 21st century, a thriving future for Hawaiians in Hawai‘i and abroad is dependent upon our ability to balance the adaptation of the old and new to our changing environments.