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Overcoming Tiki Pop: Polynesian Translingual Literature Against Cultural Exoticization

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Abstract. This study analyzes Tiki Pop as a cultural phenomenon of the 20th century and provides insight into how Polynesian translingual literature helps eliminate stereotypes imposed on indigenous cultures in the region. The author traces the history of Tiki Pop, from its inception in the 1930s to its decline at the turn of the century, and argues that this phenomenon was a byproduct of colonial times that affected the way Western audiences perceive Polynesia. This exoticizing view of the region is then contrasted to the way it is presented in Polynesian translingual literature. The author then delineates several linguistic devices that are utilized by indigenous ambilingual authors in order to outline their identity and combat stereotypical conceptualization of local cultures.

Key words: Tiki Pop, Polynesian literature, translingual literature, varieties of English, varieties of French

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Преодолевая Тики-Поп: полинезийская транслингвальная литература против культурной экзотизации

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Аннотация. Рассмотрен культурный феномен Тики-Поп, возникший в XX в., и показано, как полинезийская транслингвальная литература позволяет побороть стереотипное видение коренных культур. Автор обращается к истории Тики-Поп, начиная с зарождения в 1930-х гг. и заканчивая спадом на рубеже веков, и характеризует это явление как побочный продукт колониальной эпохи, который повлиял на то, как на западе воспринимают Полинезию. Этот экзотизирующий взгляд на регион противопоставляется тому, как он представлен в полинезийской транслингвальной литературе. Выделяется несколько лингвистических приемов, используемых коренными авторами-амбилингвами для обозначения своей идентичности и борьбы со стереотипными представлениями о местных культурах.

Ключевые слова: Тики-Поп, полинезийская литература, транслингвальная литература, контактные варианты английского языка, контактные варианты французского языка

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Introduction

Tiki Pop is a cultural phenomenon that originated in the United States in the 1930s and has had a lasting impact on how the broader public views and perceives Polynesia, its various cultures, languages and indigenous peoples. The term “Tiki Pop” itself was coined by Sven A. Kirsten, a researcher, *tiki*-connoisseur and acknowledged author who has dedicated his work to documenting the history and different waves of the tiki art style. Although the popularity of this kitschy art style has already dwindled, its shadow still looms over contemporary Polynesian art, including literature, and authors have employed various translingual and transcultural practices in order to combat Tiki Pop by implication. For the purpose of this work, a brief description of the essential characteristics of this phenomenon and its broader implications for Polynesia and its contemporary artistic movements would be imperative.

Tiki Pop: commodity fetishism with a Polynesian twist

Tiki Pop as an artistic movement can be exhaustively described by two words: romanticizing and exoticizing. With the opening of the first Polynesian-themed bar in 1933 in Hollywood, California, the Tiki craze started to slowly take over the United States. The American consumer was suddenly introduced to a whole new range of goods, products and services: from decadent cocktails and mysterious artifacts infused with indigenous mythos to escapist fantasies about an oceanic paradise where people live care-free, enjoy picturesque landscapes and are accompanied by frivolous hula-dancers. This caricatural view of Polynesia gained even more prominence after World War II, when American soldiers that had been stationed in the Pacific came back home with souvenirs and stories about island life. In 1947 Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl conducted the Kon-Tiki expedition, which became an overnight sensation in Western media, and the subsequent publication of Heyerdahl's book as well as of a documentary film further popularized Oceania and *tiki* as a symbol. Despite the fact that Heyerdahl's theory about Caucasian people being the first Polynesian settlers was quickly proven to be unscientific [1], his reputation remained somewhat unblemished and the story of Kon-Tiki had already become too popular to fail. The booming tourist industry took full advantage of that, and soon enough the region became a tourist attraction for westerners who were enchanted by advertisements as well as Hollywood classics like "Bird of Paradise" (1932), "Waikiki Wedding" (1937), "South of Tahiti" (1941) and many others. After Hawai'i was admitted to the Union as the 50th state in 1959, Polynesian destinations became even more popular with American tourists and so Tiki Pop was reinforced in a broader cultural sense. However, by the mid-1960s America's fascination with the region started to lose its mass appeal as "commercialism had begun to corrupt the very core of the Tiki Pop concept: the fantasy of a paradise in its pristine state, uncontaminated by civilization" [2. P. 590]. Younger generations were growing more disillusioned with *tiki* culture, which was reinforced by progressive sentiments propagated by the Civil rights movement and by various anticolonial initiatives across Polynesia.

Tiki Pop was then criticized as a symbol of commodity fetishism that emerged from an exploitative system and tried to mystify the dire material conditions to which it was attached [3. P. 406]. The image of a Polynesian paradise became a parody of itself, but the early 2000s saw a resurgence in its popularity due to nostalgia and a renewed interest in *tiki* memorabilia and aesthetics. It never reached the same popularity as in the middle of the 20th century, but the lasting impact of the colonial exoticization of Polynesian cultures still remains.

Although Tiki Pop refers primarily to bar culture, souvenirs, design and contemporary music with a Polynesian twist, it has nevertheless affected local populations and their struggles, as it has successfully whitewashed major historical

events and buried indigenous artforms under the oppressive “exotic” label. For decades Polynesia existed in western media as nothing more than a poster that depicted a tropical escape filled with spiritual artifacts and wood carvings that were more often than not loose interpretations by western artists of what actual indigenous art looks like [2. P. 17]. Polynesian voices were intentionally silenced by the overwhelmingly loud sounds of the ukulele and hapa haole music. This, coupled with restrictive policies and western military expansion across the Pacific, meant that colonial administrations were never truly interested in saving indigenous cultures, but were rather trying to exploit their land and labor even more. While reflecting on the legacy of native resistance literature Hawaiian poet Māhealani Dudoit expressed the following sentiment: “The ideology of US patriotism waged psychological warfare on Hawaiian consciousness. Compulsory education denigrated Hawaiian culture” [4. P. 239]. Although here M. Dudoit refers solely to Hawaiian experiences, this idea of western patriotism and education denigrating indigenous cultures is applicable to other islands as well, most notably to Samoa, Tahiti and Aotearoa (i.e., New Zealand). With that in mind it is important to note that the fight for indigenous revitalization in Polynesia is still ongoing and that at the heart of this fight lie social and political injustice and decades of economic exploitation. Tiki Pop is but a symptom of larger processes that span over centuries. A symptom that is very convenient, as it has created a colorful and harmless façade for what essentially is further colonization.

From oral tradition to written texts

The primary focus of this research, however, lies not in the realm of politics or economics, but rather in the domain of language and literature. Linguistic and literary liberation are of utmost importance in the broader cultural renaissance in Polynesia, particularly because it is directly linked to oral tradition, which had been the primary means of storytelling in precolonial times. Polynesian anthropologist Te Rangi Hīroa argues that “the oral transmission and memorizing of genealogies was a routine part of the Polynesian system of education” [5. P. 21], which can be viewed as an elaboration of M. Dudoit’s point cited above. Te Rangi Hīroa also asserts that “the recital of genealogies was an established technique in social life and served as a chronology of historical events associated with the sequence of ancestors” [5. P. 22]. The importance of oral tradition for documenting Polynesian history has since been proven by other researchers [6], but it also remains a powerful tool that allows to express indigenous grievances and create a linguistic space that is accessible only by those who have acquired a certain level of proficiency in a specific language. For example, we have seen, how important *Te reo Māori* and traditional oratorical forms were for the *Hīkoi mō te Tiriti* (Māori for “march for the treaty”) in 2024.

In this work we would like to take a closer look at another essential element of indigenous cultural resistance — Polynesian translingual literature. Historically Polynesian societies were oral, but after the colonization of the region indigenous authors had to appropriate writing in order to gain influence in a transformed social hierarchy and facilitate the preservation of tradition. The second half of the 20th century was marked by the emergence of anglophone and francophone literature that centered around indigenous stories and colonial challenges and contained elements of local cultures. By twisting western literary and linguistic norms, indigenous authors managed to break the vicious cycle of stereotypes, produced by Tiki Pop, and create their own web of texts that connects a myriad of islands like the tentacles of the great *Te Wheke-a-Muturangi*.

Translingual literature in Polynesia

Polynesian translingual literature is primarily characterized by the use of specific language varieties of both English and French. And since “culture accounts for the specificity of the variety” [7. P. 629], this region provides a unique opportunity to study how indigenous cultures of Polynesia have influenced anglophone and francophone modes of self-expression. The relatively short history of settlement of the region, in addition to the fact that indigenous ethnic groups have been interacting with colonizers for over 200 years, has led to a variety of linguistic transformations. Some of them have not been studied in as much detail as similar processes on the Asian or African continents. However, the period of primary formation of the Polynesian varieties of English and French has passed, which allows researchers to consider them both diachronically and synchronically.

Since the “dominant — oppressed” opposition is central to the process of the formation of contact languages in Polynesia, the very use of these contact languages by their speakers can be seen as a marker of a particular sociolinguistic identity. This is usually due to the fact that for representatives of indigenous ethnic groups, belonging to an indigenous “locality” becomes an indicator of status, i.e. the very fact of identifying oneself as “indigenous” and “local” brings forth hidden value [8]. Hence why when Polynesian authors write in Māori English, Hawaiian English, Hawaiian Creole, Samoan English or Tahitian French, which are the most prominent contact varieties in the region [9], they use those varieties to signal their identities to the reader. The writings of such authors as Titaua Peu, Flora Aurima Devatine, Kiana Davenport, Albert Wendt, Keri Hulme, Patricia Grace or Witi Ihimaera in that sense perfectly illustrate the shift from a monolingual paradigm to a plurilingual model of literature in a postcolonial setting [10].

In this regard, the work of translingual writers is often criticized, both by those who adhere to the monolingual literary tradition and by some members of indigenous communities to which translinguals themselves belong. The first group

of critics argues that it is impossible to create a truly valuable and high-quality piece of writing in a language that is not the author's mother tongue. On the other hand, translingual literature in varieties of English and French is seen as a form of cultural betrayal, especially by activists who are in favor of preserving indigenous languages and cultures and are against the cultural hegemony of former colonial powers. The author of the concept of contact literature, Braj Kachru, has also addressed these negative assessments of translingual creativity, clearly opposing them. He summarized the critics' arguments in the following way: firstly, in the eyes of their community, translingual writers defiantly abandon their local language in favor of a foreign language convenient for the Western reader; secondly, the foreign language is not enough to express all shades of indigenous feelings and describe culturally specific things; and thirdly, the desire to gain the approval of Western audiences leads to excessive exoticization of everything indigenous, which is damaging to cultures [11. P. 59]. Undoubtedly, such criticism is partially justified by the existence of those who have committed the act of "cultural betrayal", but it is still worth noting that the tendency to exoticize other cultures in literature is most often traced in the work of writers who are in no way connected with these cultures, i.e. authors who do not possess an indigenous identity.

In reality, the reasons for which indigenous authors engage in writing in varieties of dominant languages may differ: it can be a desire to create a text that would be more competitive on the market, a way to overcome the limitations of monolingual thinking or an attempt to create a literary space of cultural and linguistic diversity [12]. But despite the criticism of translingual literature and translingual writers themselves, their work has made an invaluable contribution to the formation of new identities in the postcolonial space [13; 14. P. 122]. Polynesian translingual authors never betray their indigenous identity, since they appropriate the language of the former colonizer in order to promote their own agenda and create narratives that destroy the stereotypical image, imposed on the region by phenomena like Tiki Pop. Following the terminology, introduced by Steven Kellman [15], those authors are recognized as ambilingual, meaning that they are proficient in both English or French and in one of the indigenous Polynesian languages. Their command of various languages allows them to create in either of them, to switch between them, or to enrich one with the other.

Weaponizing translinguality against stereotypization

The resistance of Polynesian translingual literature to the exoticization of indigenous cultures manifests itself both thematically and linguistically. The questions raised in the works of Polynesian authors are intrinsically connected to the experience of their peoples. Using their knowledge of the colonial history of the region, Polynesian authors show how, over the years, indigenous identities have been

sidelined, traditional practices forgotten, and communities destroyed by segregation, ethnic discrimination, and other forms of social and economic injustice. This clearly contrasts the idyllic image of a tropical paradise that is reinforced by Tiki Pop, thus allowing western readers to face the harsh truth about the consequences of imperialist domination. Another theme that is particularly prevalent in the works of Kiana Davenport, Patricia Grace and Titaua Peu is land restitution, since connection to land is one of the central ideas of their native cosmologies (e.g. *Aloha ‘Āina* in Hawai’i or the concept of *tangata whenua* in Māori). In this sense, the works of these authors can be seen as the culmination of the renaissance movements that began in the second half of the 20th century and spurred the revitalization of indigenous cultures [16]. The renaissance era was marked by new currents in Polynesian music, a renewed interest in traditional navigational practices, a critical rethinking of postcolonial indigenous experiences and an increased use of native languages [17; 18]. Consequentially, it is in that period of time that the ambilinguality of Polynesian authors became prominent and allowed their voices to be heard across the Pacific.

Now we would like to present several examples of linguistic strategies used by Polynesian translingual authors that reflect their linguacultural identity, as well as the identity of their characters. Since this study is focused on written and not oral texts, it is natural that the main indicators of translingualism in this case would be grammatical and lexical features of Polynesian varieties of English and French. And when we talk about lexical borrowings from indigenous languages, it is important to note that they are not limited to the nominative function alone, as they represent ontic elements that, with adequate decoding of potential connotations, may explicate the basis of a foreign linguistic worldview [19. P. 194].

(a) He stamped into the *fale*, whipped off his wet *lavalava* from underneath the dry towel which he had wrapped on, flung it out on to the stone *paepae*, and then disappeared behind the curtains to start dressing for work.¹

First of all, Polynesian translingual literature is characterized by the organic use of imprints from indigenous languages, as seen in example (a), taken from Albert Wendt’s “Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree”. By “organic use” we mean that authors use lexical items from an indigenous language in an almost mundane fashion, since to them many of these items have become an inalienable part of their speech. This stands in clear opposition to what corporate Tiki Pop art has been doing: borrowing words from indigenous languages, stripping them off the original meaning and injecting them with a new one that is more commercially favorable. When translingual authors implement Polynesian lexical borrowings, they are not

¹ Wendt, A. 1999. Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press. Print. P. 89

looking to make their texts sound more “exotic”, as their primary motivation is not monetary gain. Rather they are actively signaling their multicultural identity and making sure that it is not reduced to a simple caricature of itself.

(b) Chez les Blancs, se tatouer était signe de ralliement, devenir solidaire d’un peuple jadis opprimé. ... Quelques-uns adoptèrent le *pāreu*, sans complexe, ils se mirent à baragouiner quelques mots tahitiens, par “sympathie”. ... Nos légendes fleurirent dans toutes les librairies, grâce au “gentil-auteur-*pōpa*’ā-qui-aimait-tant-ce-pays”. Grâce à lui, nous avons “redécouvert” notre “si-belle-culture-*mā’ohi*”. Du coup, le Tahitien se sentit un peu perdu. On lui avait toujours appris que ce temps passé était celui du *pōiri*, et voilà qu’à présent on lui reprochait ses oublis, ses amnésies.²

This sentiment can sometimes be explicitly expressed, as seen in extract (b). Here Tahitian author Titaua Peu describes the discordant relationship that has been established between the white Europeans that seemingly support the indigenous cause and Tahitians themselves. By weaving specific borrowings from her native language into this poignant passage, T. Peu manages to create a reverse caricature: the behavior of the ex-colonizer is being ridiculed using Tahitian lexical items. A sharp contrast to the trope of the “noble savage” perpetuated by Western imagery of the Pacific.

(c) “Rosie Perez already tired wit’ four kids, hubby fighting overseas. One night she say me, ‘Leilani, you like *hānai* dis numbah five?’ I say, too good! Why not? All my kids gone far and wide. Except for Malia, who t’ank God take care of us while everybody gone. Yeah. T’ank God fo’ Malia.”³

Another linguistic device that allows Polynesian authors to escape the normative style of anglophone literature and at the same time create specific idiolects for their characters is creolization of speech. Examples of this can be found in Kiana Davenport’s series of Hawaiian novels, where some characters converse exclusively in Hawaiian Creole English (HCE). In extract (c), a Native Hawaiian woman’s speech demonstrates several linguistic attributes of HCE: lack of sequence of tenses; use of *like* instead of the modal verb *will*; omission or mispronunciation of fricatives and alveolar tremors, which the author conveys graphically with apostrophes, word abbreviations, or word modifications. Despite the negative connotations attached to the use of HCE (i.e. “low social status”; “bad upbringing”; “lack of education”), its appearance in literary texts, on the one hand, contributes to its normalization in society, which is a net positive since it’s been gaining popularity in Hawai’i, and on the other hand, it allows to diversify these texts stylistically. We

² Peu, T. 2021. *Mutismes*. Pirae: Au vent des îles. Print. P. 125

³ Davenport, K. 1999. *Song of the Exile*. New York: Ballantine Books. Print. P. 216–217

can also point out that creolized passages in K. Davenport's works often times accentuate the hardships that Hawaiian indigenous communities experienced in the past or are experiencing now, and in that sense creolized speech becomes another means of opposing the romanticized view of the island promoted by the American tourism industry.

(d) I smiled at him, reflectively. I placed the shell back to my ear. *Hoki mai, hoki mai ki te wa kainga*, the sea whispered, come home⁴.

Lastly, we would like to draw attention to code-switching in Polynesian translingual literature. As was previously mentioned, the authors in question are ambilingual, meaning that they are fully capable of writing in their indigenous languages as well. In extract (d), taken from Witi Ihimaera's novel "The Whale Rider", the narration switches from English to Māori and it is not a mere use of loanwords, but an inclusion of a self-functioning syntactic structure in an indigenous language. This type of code-switching is indicative of other Polynesian authors as well, most notably the Tahitian poet Flora Aurima Devatine, whose works are influenced by traditional oratory practices like *fa'atara* and *paripari fenua*. Going back to W. Ihimaera's novel, it is also worth noting, that switching to Māori allows him to tap into indigenous mythology and use the power of his native speech to make allusions to the story of Paikea, a Māori ancestor from the legendary land of Hawaiki. This demonstrates the ability of Polynesian translingual authors to navigate their traditions and mythologies in such a way that produces deeper meanings and invites the unaware reader to explore never-before-seen dimensions. While Tiki Pop offers to the consumer what essentially is an amalgamation of false narratives and surface-level understanding of myths that are sometimes not even linked to Polynesia and its cultures, translingual authors present traditional narratives in a much more delicate and productive manner.

Conclusion

To conclude, we would like to quote Tongan writer and anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa: "We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces that we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed places, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves" [20. P. 160]. We believe that phenomena like Tiki Pop, that at first glance may seem unthreatening, are the ones that are actually confining Polynesian peoples psychologically. Although colonial empires of the past are gone, their remnants haunt indigenous cultures to this day, and in order to regain power Polynesians had

⁴ Ihimaera, W. 2005. *The Whale Rider*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers. P. 57

to appropriate one of the weapons of the colonizer: their pluricentric language. In that sense translingual literature is a perfect instrument in the arms of Polynesian authors, since it allows them to use Western literary forms for their own purposes and transform the colonizer's language according to their liking. And although some stereotypes are harder to eradicate than others, translingual literature has definitely contributed to the broader cultural decolonization of Polynesia.

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