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The Nineteenth-Century Hawaiian Newspaper Archive

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In the spirit of transparency, I would begin by pointing out that my primary research interests lie in a different sphere: my current book project on literary aestheticism and science, for instance, is entirely monolingual. However, I am developing secondary interests in Victorian Oceania, and, in particular, the nineteenth-century Hawaiian newspaper archive. What follows will be gestural and speculative, as much of this research remains on the horizon. But I want to provide an introduction to this archive, an overview of my own nascent interests therein, and a short assessment of the opportunities and challenges of working in this archive. In the course of this brief paper, I will also address the main questions that structured our workshop: namely, how and why a multilingual approach is necessary to research in this archive; and what is lost without such an approach, both to periodical and Victorian studies.

First, a bit of background. For much of the nineteenth century, until the forced abdication of its last queen in 1893, Hawai'i was an independent constitutional monarchy with extensive diplomatic ties abroad and a richly cosmopolitan national culture. Due to a mixture of missionary initiatives and governmental policy, the Kingdom of Hawai'i boasted one of the highest literacy rates in the world, and was home to a correspondingly robust periodical market. Over one hundred distinct Hawaiian-language newspaper titles appeared between 1834 and 1940, yielding a vast print archive that runs, according to some estimates, into the millions of pages. Both original and microfilm copies of these materials are strewn across public and private collections throughout Hawai'i. Additionally, a segment of that archive — about 13,000 issues — has been digitized through the [Papakilo](#) database, an ongoing project managed by the Office of Hawaiian Affairs.

As for content, these newspapers featured all the genres of journalism we would expect to find in any daily periodical: local and international news, reports of legislative activities in the Hawaiian parliament, guest and staff-written editorials, and reader-submitted letters to the editor. Most of these newspapers also published native mo'olelo, ka'ao, and mele — that is, stories, legends, and songs, some original and others adapted or transcribed from Hawaiian oral tradition. The cultural significance of this particular material is self-evident: as Hawaiian studies scholar Noenoe K. Silva has observed, some traditional mo'olelo and mele are extant only in these newspapers; in other cases, the newspapers offer richer, more complete, or more accurate versions than are available in volume sources.¹

But as someone working in Victorian studies, I am particularly fascinated by the broad swathe of foreign-language literature that was translated into Hawaiian and

1 Noenoe K. Silva, *The Power of the Steel-Tipped Pen: Reconstructing Native Hawaiian Intellectual History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

printed in these newspapers. Hawaiian readers in this period evidently had a voracious and eclectic taste: medieval romances and fairy tales drawn from the Brothers Grimm were especially popular, as were nineteenth-century adventure serials and biographies of famous European figures such as Walter Raleigh and Mary Stuart. Examples of curious juxtapositions abound. An issue of *Ke Au Okoa* from September 1869, for instance, features historian Samuel Kamakau's column 'Ka Moolelo Hawaii' — a history of Hawai'i's ruling families — alongside the latest instalment of *Ka Haku Monete Kariso*, or *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Fig. 1). An issue of the competing newspaper *Ka Nupepa Kuokoa* concatenates a serialized translation of Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* with palapala (letters). The visual prominence of these serials — they typically begin on the front page, above the fold — suggests how central they were to each newspaper's readerly appeal.



Fig. 1 Detail from *Ke Au Okoa* (Honolulu, HI), 9 September 1869. Image courtesy Papakilo Database.

Simply put, an extended study of this archive demands a multilingual approach. In practical terms, its sheer breadth means that the bulk of this archive has never been translated. Hawaiian historian Noelani Arista notes that this has led English-speaking scholars to default to English-language sources in the (mistaken) assumption of 'primary-source scarcity'.² Even well-meaning researchers, if they have only limited reading knowledge of Hawaiian, are likely to over-rely on what little bits of this archive have been translated into English (Kamakau's historiography, for instance). Puakea Nogelmeier argues that this has created what he calls a 'Discourse of Sufficiency' in scholarship about the period — that is, an assumption that these translated texts can be treated as emblematic of the archive *in toto*.³

Nogelmeier's formulation is also helpful for thinking about the second question this workshop proposed, about what would be lost without a multilingual approach. As Nogelmeier compellingly argues, a discourse of sufficiency both obscures the depth and diversity of Hawaiian literary culture and suppresses other, non-written forms of Indigenous knowledge. From the perspective of Victorian studies, too, this rich archive hints at the complex colonial relations that defined Polynesia in this era, as well as how they were enmeshed in popular print. Different newspapers stacked out different positions on a whole host of issues related to Hawai'i's status as a hub in the Pacific: which of

2 Noelani Arista, 'Ka Waihana Palapala Mānalo: Research in a Time of Plenty. Colonialism and the Hawaiian-Language Archives', in *Indigenous Textual Cultures*, ed. by Tony Ballantyne, Lachy Paterson, and Angela Wanhalla (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), pp. 31–59, (p. 33).
3 Nogelmeier, M. Puakea, *Mai Pa'a I Ka Leo: Historical Voice in Hawaiian Print Materials, Looking Forward and Listening Back* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, Awauiulu Press, 2010), xiii.

the colonial power players the kingdom should cultivate as allies; what concessions to offer those allies; how to strike a balance between cultural traditionalism and modern internationalism. The discipline of Victorian studies is in the midst of a turn toward the global: if we are indeed committed to de-centering Britishness as the focal point of our discipline, we might start by considering what light these and other archives might shed on our conceptions of the global nineteenth century.

Thinking prospectively, I am intensely aware of the challenges that would attend on any large research project in this archive. The biggest stumbling block is my own rudimentary reading knowledge of Hawaiian. It is a work in progress, made more difficult by the expansively lyrical and metaphorical nature of the Hawaiian language, especially marked in nineteenth-century usage (I am thinking specifically of the Hawaiian principle of *kaona* or double meaning, although the fact that these newspapers did not print diacritics poses an additional challenge). There is also the broader problem of accessibility — as I mentioned before, only some of this archive is digitized.

In the longer term, I am also conscious of the kinds of research practices we typically adopt in an archive, and how those practices might be implicated in discursive forms of imperialist exploitation and domination. When I talk about this archive, I try to avoid the language of revelation and discovery (common enough in articulations of scholarly method), because this language would shortchange the Indigenous and Hawaiian studies scholars who have been doing this work for decades.⁴ As a Native Hawaiian myself, I feel called to do this work, too — called, but not entitled. Working in this archive requires not only certain kinds of expertise, but also a certain mindset: one capable of recognizing the *limits* of expertise and the concomitant necessity of collaboration, curiosity, and humility.

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4 During the Q&A, I was fortunate enough to meet Craig Howes at the University of Hawai'i, who has conducted an exhaustive survey of serialized Hawaiian translations. In the weeks since, he has been kind enough to share his research with me; I would encourage anyone interested in the topic to consult his forthcoming essay on Hawaiian translations of G. W. M. Reynolds's serials.