BOOK REVIEW FORUM

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I am an art conservator whose practice was radically altered by an object, the *Kamehameha I* sculpture in North Kohala, Hawai'i, and the people who currently interact with it. As expressed in *The Painted King: Art, Activism, and Authenticity in Hawai'i*, I had never encountered an historical object whose physical appearance was so dramatically altered by people who live with it. They not only paint it in life like colors, but residents honor it with gifts, chanting, *hula*, and other local forms of cultural respect. My decision to employ participatory and ethnographic research methods in the conservation project was a response to the strong relationships that I witnessed between people in North Kohala and their sculpture.

Designing the project required considerable time, because it was clear to me that I needed to incorporate qualitative research into my standard archival and material procedures. I also decided to investigate the potential for working with community members in more ambitious ways than I had before. I aimed to produce new knowledge through community interaction that would loop back to inform conservation decision-making and practice. In taking this on, I was advised by many in Hawai'i to slow down, listen, and allow community members to take over some aspects of decision making. Karen Stevenson clearly knows what this means in Hawai'i. I needed to seek permission and receive guidance from elders who at first were not available to me. I received advice to work with Native Hawaiian partners in project-related activities for children. This became the vehicle for stimulating

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conversations among families about the project, giving elders access to project concerns. It took time, but elder voices eventually became central to conservation decision making.

Being the guy who was going to conserve the sculpture, people wanted to speak with me whether I was at the site or elsewhere in the district. This increased as people came to confront the paint versus gold dilemma. I had entrée that can otherwise be hard to gain in fieldwork. In my interviews, I typically began by asking whether the sculpture should be gold leafed, as the artist originally intended it, or painted, as it had been since its 1883 installation. It did not take long for people to get to larger issues of spiritual investment in the sculpture, tensions that exist in the community, and how to represent the Native Hawaiian past.

In some instances, learning came during our physical interventions on the scaffolding. In what turned out to have more significance than I anticipated, we removed the king's bronze eyes at an early stage of treatment (Fig. 1). It was not generally known that a maintenance worker had added the eyes to the sculpture in the 1970s. The epoxy that held them in place would have failed under intense steam blasting during paint removal, hence our decision to remove them for safekeeping on the first day of the project. I asked a Kamehameha descendant working with me on the scaffolding to perform the task, thinking that this would be an honor for him. I learned later that he quietly apologized to Kamehameha for standing above him and for taking his eyes out. Removing the eyes was distressing for an elder advisor on the project because of their significance that stems from the function of eyes in *ki'i* (traditional Hawaiian sculpture) in burial practices. She came close to dropping her advisory role because of the evident disrespect I had shown toward the king. Fortunately a gentle negotiation saved the day. The event led to considerable discussion about Kamehameha's eyes among the community project advisors, involving some measured levity and revealing information that no one had mentioned in my forty semi-structured interviews.

Clearly there are methodological hazards associated with physically intervening in the life of an object when one is studying its community. Yet such interventions in the context of cultural research can encourage reflection on issues such as the role of eyes in traditional Hawaiian sculpture that may otherwise not surface. It also revealed patterns of difference and mutual consideration among local residents. I also came to see space for forgiveness, for accommodation with an outsider's expertise, and in the end for deploying a sense of humor in regard to an artifact considered to have accumulated *mana*.

Another instance of knowledge produced through practice was in the choice of brown paint for the skin. In my research, I learned that a prior

FIGURE 1. **Kamehameha Descendant Removing Eyeballs From the *Kamehameha I* Sculpture During the Conservation Project.**

maintenance worker had matched the brown skin of a female student whose ancestors had emigrated from the Philippines. My color wheel of brown paint samples led to conversations about Kamehameha's two possible fathers with different skin tones, skin color in today's multicultural Kohala, and racism that exists among various cultural groups. All questions that I, as an outsider, could not have easily asked without my color wheel and a job to do. Through these discussions, I also learned about contestation over who is Hawaiian and who is local.

The conservation moment in an object's life can be an ideal moment for doing cultural research. It pulls in different factions, groups, and understandings. It reveals politics of different sorts, including along dimensions of ethnicity, race, religion, gender, and age. Social scientists cannot easily intervene as conservators do, despite efforts at reflexive practice that moves their location beyond a "fly on the wall."

In reading the three reviews, so well crafted and appreciated, I was reminded of my struggle to find voice and organize my thoughts in writing the book. My prior conservation writing was "factual," third person, and almost always in passive voice. It was a writing coach who convinced me to tell the story from my own point of view—beginning with my nervous journey to visit the sculpture for the first time. Organizing the writing from my own perspective in the end allowed me to critique my field of heritage conservation and relate my response to what I learned through various modes of research and through working with the community.

I faced other dilemmas in writing the book, including what to call it, what images to use, and how to select and organize the content. Aaron Glass suggests a different title, a different cover image, and an entirely different structure for the book. I could have coauthored the volume with an anthropologist and produced a very different book for a different target audience. As it is, I envisioned an intelligent reader who is distant from conservation, social sciences, and contemporary Hawaiian culture. My real aim in writing the book was to promote a participatory model for community engagement in heritage conservation that integrates community into research, decision making, and physical interventions. A conservator/anthropologist partnership would no doubt lead to different outcomes.

Throughout the sculpture's history and certainly in its contemporary social context, people have used it for various spiritual, political, economic, educational, and other purposes. In addition to these functions, it became a conservation object in the eyes of those who engaged in the project. Further unpacking this with the use of additional knowledge from material culture studies, cultural anthropology, sociology, and performance studies, implicit

in Glass' comments, would no doubt provide a richer understanding of active relationships between people and cultural objects.

I agree with Stacy L. Kamehiro and Maile Arvin's observation that there are few examples of conservation projects that redirect aims to facilitate community self-representation and develop culturally appropriate preservation methods. There are entrenched power relations that do not easily accommodate multiple values associated with cultural materials from the past. The dominance of positivist approaches to analyzing physical condition and identifying their unique cultural value in conservation research are difficult to counter. Although multi-perspectivism is well accepted in fields like material culture studies, conservation still carries the motif/burden/vision of itself as a "science," with an old-fashioned sense of objectivity.

I address concerns of multiple perspectives in the book, in part by writing about a spectrum of relevance that historical objects have for people who surround them today. At one end, there are many objects in museums, archives, and public collections that few people know or care about. At the other end are powerfully symbolic and contested objects that trigger protest, terrorist acts, and war. There is also a range of objects in between that would be ripe for civil community discussion. The goal is to find the right object of significance whose multiple meanings are not so intense as to create violent conflict. After that, the process of participatory conservation involves identifying key community members and engaging as many others as possible in research and decision making, using conservation dilemmas as a means to draw them in.

During my research and work with the Kohala community I was aware of the multiple roles I played as project instigator, principal participant, and ethnographer. At times residents challenged me. Several people I spoke with asked why, as a nonlocal, I should manage the conservation project. Others asked why I wanted to involve the community at all, because I was the "expert" brought in from the mainland.

My strategy in writing the book was to reveal community voices in real time as the project unfolded through a narrative format. I used descriptions of participant concerns derived from my field notes and extensive quotes from my interviews. I also quoted texts generated by community members in opinion pieces in local media, and reported on community projects such as a high school debate and classroom art projects that stimulated dialog about local social issues.

Keamehir and Arvin mention the only other example of participatory, community-based conservation of which I am aware. It is the work of Dean Sully and his colleagues on the conservation of *Hinemihi*, a Māori *marae*, or meetinghouse in Clandon Park in West Clandon, England (Sully, 2008).

Sully involved Māori conservators, scholars, and community representatives in writing about the project. Unlike *The Painted King,* which I authored on my own, he invited Māori participants and scholars to author their own chapters in the completed volume. The book includes writings on other *marae* outside of New Zealand to convey a broad understanding through multiple case studies. Together, the various authors offer diverse criticism of Western conservation. They expand its aims from maintaining the physical fabric of these buildings to impacting peoples' lives and producing new knowledge about historic and contemporary Māori culture.

Although not broadly participatory, The National Museums of Scotland conducted another project involving a Māori artifact that produced new knowledge through conservation intervention (Stable 2012). During curatorial research, staff discovered that a Māori war canoe, or *Waka Taua* in the collection was actually a complex composite of a small river canoe, a full-sized war canoe, and various repairs and replacement parts added over time since its arrival in Scotland. Rather than disassemble all of these elements and exhibit them separately, the curator and conservator decided to contract George Nuku, a Māori artist, to replace missing elements in carved plastic. Nuku's clear plastic carvings are in stark contrast to the wood elements on the canoes. Whereas Western conservators strive to make their hand more or less invisible in their restorations, Nuku forces the viewer to focus on his additions. They attract the viewer's eye and lead to questions about relationships between older elements of the two canoe fragments and new elements added by a contemporary Māori carver. In effect, they initiate a conversation about de-contextualized historic material culture and contemporary Māori response that begins within the object itself.

In this innovation, the museum opens public dialog about cultural issues through an artist's intervention. In comparison, I took a different path with the Kamehameha sculpture. As I report in the book, a number of residents in Kohala suggested radical alterations to the sculpture that I was not prepared to support. One suggestion was to chisel off Kamehameha's Roman style sandals. Another was to turn his beckoning hand around to represent a more traditional Hawaiian gesture. A third was to throw the sculpture back in the sea where it spent time after a dramatic shipwreck on its way from Germany to Hawai'i. I analyze these suggestions along with others in my writing, but in practice we took what now looks like a more conservative course. The paint layer we applied continues a local tradition and is reversible. Another conservator working with future community members may arrive at very different decisions, and nothing we did will interfere with their doing so.

Through the *Kamehameha* sculpture conservation project and the subsequent writing of the book, I learned that conservation has tremendous

potential to do cultural work in reconstructing public memory and questioning authority in heritage management. I also learned that conservation is not necessarily about getting the past "right," but finding value in the process of exploring versions of the past and assessing power dynamics in deciding what the past should look like. I learned that the patina is political.

I believe that the time is ripe for more participatory conservation projects that effectively communicate findings and engage public discussion on cultural issues associated with heritage objects. I would love to hear from readers of *Pacific Studies* about other cases of community-based conservation, along with potential for new projects in the future.

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