



Photo: Marlène Ramírez-Cancio

## Hula as Resistance

Li Cornfeld | new york University

Written and Directed by Vicky Holt Takamine, featuring Jamaica Osorio. Universidad Nacional de Bogotá, Hemispheric Institute Encuentro, Bogotá, Colombia, 24 August 2009.



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Vicky Takamine drums while Christina Mauliola Cook and Alison Hartle dance in Hula as Resistance.

Photo by Paula Kupfer.

In bright coral dresses and green wreathes, two women dance hulas to the drumming and chanting of a third. Interspersed with the musical numbers, a young woman in jeans and sneakers performs poems about Hawaiian indigeneity. Hula as Resistance, a performance directed by Vicky Holt Takamine at the Hemispheric Institute's Bogotá Encuentro on 24 August 2009, raises questions regarding the ways in which indigenous languages, like indigenous dance vocabularies, fit into a larger apparatus of linguistic citizenship.

As an activist, Takamine teaches hula as a means of resisting imperialism. For similar reasons the production's featured poet, Jamaica Osorio, attended a primary school where instruction took place only in Hawaiian. In her Encuentro keynote address entitled "Language Ecology, Language Politics" (26 August 2009), Mary Louise Pratt defined linguistic citizenship as possessed by those who have fully mastered a given language, emphasizing that linguistic citizenship need not correspond to national citizenship. When addressing Encuentro participants two days after Takamine's production, Pratt noted Hula's closing poem, in which Osorio examines her ambivalence toward her family's decision to send her to the immersion school, as an example of how struggles over linguistic citizenship, specifically through questioning the use of a dying language, are weathered by children.

Beyond suggesting how young people might negotiate their cultural lineage, Osorio's poems, with lines in both English and Hawaiian, present strategies performers can use in order to communicate with audiences of varied linguistic citizenships. In the international context of the Encuentro, Hula's use of indigenous dance in conjunction with several spoken languages not only presents dual modalities for resisting imperial practice, it also renders their performance accessible to an audience that otherwise lacks a common vocabulary.

As Pratt theorized in her address, linguistic particularities enable us to mark language as our own without endangering our linguistic citizenship. Similarly, using wordplay to assert dominance over language forms the heart of spoken word poetry, especially under the influence of competitive poetry slams. Yet Pratt argues that though language is grounded in production, its reception is also worth studying. "Duty," Osorio's closing poem, addresses her struggle to simultaneously assert ownership over (and in) two languages, craftily emphasizing the tangled relationship between linguistic production and reception.

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Jamaica Osorio performs spoken word in Hula as Resistance

Photo: Marlène Ramírez-Cancio

Osorio put her training as an accomplished slam poet to effective use while performing for the international audience in Bogotá. By employing the rhythms of spoken word poetry, a performance style designed to give each word its full weight, Osorio grants audience members of limited language ability longer comprehension time than they would have with more natural speech patterns. Spoken word's customary non-matrixed emotion further behooves performers who are addressing audiences of limited language ability. The emotional honesty at play in Hula achieved similar communicative ends in the hands of other performance groups at the 2009 Encuentro, where the absence of irony served as a tool for combating points of untranslatability. Perhaps it was not a coincidence that the emotional earnestness of Hula constituted one of the more dominant tropes of the Encuentro productions.

Words are Osorio's singular artistic tool, making poetry a particularly compelling form with which to address her struggle to exert ownership over language. If spoken word sometimes comes across as uncomfortably earnest, such discomfort becomes productive when used to address psychic and geographic sites where language collapses. Osorio allowed her sentiment to burn through the words of this multilingual performance, while her audience shifted in varying degrees of comfort provoked by the fresh poignancy of her speech. To what extent can audiences understand sentiment without comprehending the language used to convey it? What gets communicated at the crux of untranslatability?

Osorio's skillful translating (or not) between two languages manifests the disconnect central to her struggles with translation; she is presumably most accustomed to performing her poems for audiences who speak English and Hawaiian. By performing in the context of indigenous dance, with ensemble members reciting English and Spanish texts pertinent to their dances, Osorio situated her linguistic dilemmas within the vocabularies of dance, song, and spoken word.

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Vicky Holt Takamine performs in Hula as Resistance

Photo: Julio Pantoja

Perhaps more significantly, the Spanish text made Hula one of few performances at the Encuentro to invoke Spanish not as a language of indigeneity, complicating the English/Spanish duality which pervaded much of the Encuentro. Hula instead shifted the geographic lens of the North American/South American binary, expanding the geographical scope of post-colonialism in the Americas while examining indigeneity in a transnational context. Pratt noted that current trends predict that within the next hundred years, half of the world's languages will disappear. Hula raised audience members' linguistic consciousness, prompting us to examine our degree of fluency in the languages we know as well as our knowledge of the languages we do not.

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