

Images in Cultural Psychiatry

Queen liliuokalani imprisonment quilt: Understanding cultural psychiatry

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Abstract *Queen Liliuokalani Imprisonment Quilt 97"X 95" (1895), serves as an important historical document, highlighting the abdication of the last monarch of Hawaii, Queen Liliuokalani, during a coup established by U.S business men with a plan to annex Hawaii. Through an in-depth evaluation of the Queen's Quilt, the author hopes to highlight the importance of cultural psychiatry. Like this quilt, representing not only Native Hawaiian beauty but also depicting the historical struggles of maintaining Native Hawaiian identity in the midst of the dominating white western forces, contemporary western psychiatry will need to continue to address the underlying struggle in how to appropriately advocate culturally sensitive care, especially for marginalised groups.*

Keywords: Cultural Psychiatry, Hawaii, Quilt, Art History, Diversity in Psychiatry.

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IMAGES IN CULTURAL PSYCHIATRY

The state of Hawai'i, formally known as the kingdom of Hawai'i, has a complex history, marred by white colonialism; since European contact and later U.S colonisation and takeover of Hawai'i, there has been a violent disruption that permeated throughout the traditional Hawaiian society. Efficient agricultural systems were dismantled and land was appropriated. Traditional economies were replaced with Western systems and Hawaiian culture and land commodified primarily for tourism. Notably Hawaiians lost political sovereignty. Perhaps the most infamous event was in 1893, when the last monarch of Hawaii, Queen Liliuokalani, was forced to abdicate her throne during a coup established by U.S business men with a plan to annex Hawaii (Hackler & Woodard, 2001). In 1895, after the Hawaiian royalists failed to restore Queen Liliuokalani to her throne, she was forced to cede any of her remaining

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authority to the U.S government; she was subjected to house arrest, forced to stay in her bedroom at Iolani Palace for about 8 months (Hackler & Woodard, 2001).

During her house arrest, Queen Liliuokalani engaged in quilt making, creating a 97”X 95” quilt in the crazy quilt style, sewing pieces of different velvets, silks, and linens together and documenting her imprisonment (Hackler R. & Woodard L. 2001). There are a total of 9 square panels. In the center of the quilt, one of these squares is subdivided into four smaller squares. Here, Queen Liliuokalani depicted the date when she was forced to step down and the events that precipitated her arrest (Hackler & Woodard, 2001). The other 8 panels surround this center one, depicting numerous patches sewn together with careful embroidery and embellishments.

The quilt serves as an important historical document, preserving Native Hawaiians’ cultural heritage. The art of quilt making is steeped in Hawaiian tradition. Hawaiian quilting originally was first derived from the making of bark cloth where strips of bark from the wauke plant would be beaten to create kapa (Dwyer, 2008) Native Hawaiians would then create paper cutting or applique designs on the quilt.² Due to the tropical climate in Hawaii, quilt making was primarily viewed as a creative art form; as seen in the bottom left panel, it features fishes, birds, and eggs celebrating Hawaiian nature.

The quilt also serves as a symbol of Native Hawaiians’ resistance to the 55 oppressive white hegemonic powers amid the sociopolitical turmoil. In the bottom right panel are the words Kuu Hae Aloha or My Beloved Flag, with the symbol of the Hawaiian flag between the words; it is notable that in 1894, when Hawaii was declared a republic, the Hawaiian flag was replaced with the American flag (Dwyer, 2008). The Hawaiian flag, therefore, became a symbol of protest that loyalists to the Hawaiian crown would sew in the undersides of their bedroom quilts (Dwyer, 2008). As seen in different panels, different individuals’ names are scattered throughout, friends and supporters of the monarchy.

I must clarify that although I live in Hawaii, I am not Native Hawaiian; Native Hawaiians are individuals who identify as descendants of the indigenous Polynesian group who were the original inhabitants of Hawai’i. Rather, I am a transplant, an outsider, and therefore, I must first recognize my own background and privileges; it would be an egregious error to believe that I understand the Native Hawaiian perspective of this event. Therefore, I would like to acknowledge my outsider’s perspective in viewing the Queen’s Quilt.

As I walked across the halls of Iolani Palace, I reached the final room; there in the middle of the room lies the Queen’s Quilt encased in glass. As visitors peered into the display a quiet reverence reverberated throughout the room. When it was my turn to view the quilt, I began to feel an overwhelming wave of

sadness. The history of Queen Liliuokalani was that of a tragedy. However, there was also a pervasive feeling of loss: a loss of the Hawaiian queen, a loss of a distinct Hawaiian identity overshadowed by Western forces. Mixed with this feeling of loss was a sense of grief, the need to mourn a lost future of Hawaii, what could have been; Hawaii's trajectory was forever changed by this cataclysmic event depicted on the quilt. With the dominating Western culture, Hawaiian culture has become overly simplified into stereotypes so it could be easily digestible and consumed by the western tourist. Hawaii is sold as a paradise; visitors come to all-inclusive resorts to enjoy the relaxing beach with their drinks and buy cheap baubles of girls in hula skirts or ostentatious oversized aloha shirts lining the mall kiosks. After a few days of enjoyment, they leave, with their memories of a fun vacation slowly fading into the background as they return to their routine lives. As an outsider myself who is not originally from Hawaii, I must admit that I have no knowledge of the full complexity and depth of Hawaii's history and culture. Rather, the pervasive pop culture and media depictions of Hawaii colored my understanding. As I continued to stand in the room viewing the Queen's Quilt, feelings of shame crept up upon me. As a provider, here in Hawaii, my own incompetence was worrisome; how was I supposed to provide quality psychiatric care without understanding the underlying cultural background, history, and traumas of my patients and local communities? As I was sitting with these feelings of discomfort, I ultimately came to the realization that my primary role as their physician was not to be an expert in Hawaiian culture; rather it is to listen, to recognize my own limitations, and to be receptive and acknowledge my patients' unique perspectives.

The Queen's Quilt also provides a way for the viewer to better understand general concepts of cultural psychiatry. Specifically, the predominating default culture has been white and heteronormative (BJPsych, 2015, pp. 187-190). Ethnic marginalized communities feel pressured to follow this unspoken rule to try to fit within the Eurocentric standards and ultimately silences the individual (BJPsych, 2015, pp. 187-190).

It is notable that psychiatry has a history of racism and discrimination (Antić, 2021, pp. 359–384). However, it is too easy to denounce this troublesome history without committing errors to mitigate the wrongs; this includes making over generalizations and applying stereotypes about different cultures lest it becomes an “us” vs. “them” or “European” vs “nonEuropean cultures” to try to be culturally adept, however superficially and offensively so.

Similarly, when clinicians from the predominant culture are working with marginalized groups, minorities are tasked with “becoming experts” of their associated cultures in an attempt to help educate the clinician so the clinician may provide the culturally appropriate care that the patient seeks. However, this places an unfair and heavy burden on the patient to be responsible for the clinician's own exploration and cultural development.



Figure 1: Queen Liliuokalani Imprisonment Quilt 97"X 95" (1895)

Rather, for the clinician, the important point is to recognize her own biases and beliefs in relation to the patient, understanding that the clinician can never truly be neutral (BJPsych, 2015, pp. 187-190). This is the first step for the clinician. The clinician should have the awareness of her own ignorance as well be willing to engage in self-reflection (BJPsych, 2015, pp. 187-190). For marginalized groups, for too long their voices have been silenced, or modified to fit what is deemed as "appropriate," to fit the white hegemonic narrative. Therefore, they too should be actively involved in continuing to spread important cultural knowledge. However, it is important that this process is

collaborative, a joint project for both the clinician and the patient, and not just the patient alone.

Like this quilt, representing not only Native Hawaiian beauty but also depicting the historical struggles of maintaining Native Hawaiian identity in the midst of the dominating white western forces, contemporary western psychiatry will need to continue to address the underlying struggle in how to appropriately advocate culturally sensitive care, especially for marginalized groups, while also addressing how racism and bigotry have impacted the legacy of psychiatry.

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