

Local Story: The Massie-Kahahawai Case and the Culture of History

Review by LEEANA ACFALLE

Local Story: The Massie-Kahahawai Case and the Culture of History, by John P. Rosa. University of Hawai'i Press, 2014. 163 pages. \$19.99 (paperback).

Talk Story to Me

Historians are tasked with the defense of their research, especially if the subject or events are familiar or common knowledge to many. New sources or methods are in the foreground of their analyses in an attempt to supplement or even change the consensus about a particular historical event. How does John P. Rosa's *Local Story: The Massie-Kahahawai Case and the Culture of History*, which focuses on one of the most notorious criminal cases in Hawai'ian history, fit into this model? How does this re-telling affect someone like me, whose knowledge and experience of Hawai'ian history and culture include only a few readings in undergraduate courses, a predilection for *poke*, and about a year of *hula* lessons? Rosa states he "aims to relate the story to audiences, large and small, both in Hawai'i and on the continental United States" (6), but how would this re-telling affect the majority of his intended Western audience, both white and non-white, who have presumably been indoctrinated by liberalism and individualism since birth? Rosa asserts that these "American national perspectives" are the ink in the pen of history in the dominant recollections of this event. But does his pen have enough ink?

On September 12, 1931, Thalia Massie alleged she was taken and raped by "some Hawai'ian boys." Massie was a white woman who was the wife of a US naval lieutenant and, as such, a privileged member of Hawai'i's ruling elite. Initially, she could not identify her assailants, but within 12 hours of the attack, she claimed the five men police showed her were the assailants. A combination of political factors and social assumptions led to the complete mishandling of the case by police and prosecutors, which subsequently resulted in a mistrial. A few months after the trial, one of the alleged assailants, Joseph Kahahawai was kidnapped and murdered by Massie's husband, mother, and two other navy men.

Based on this incident, Rosa examines how and why the portrayal of the Massie-Kahahawai case as a "local" (Hawai'ian) story instead of an American story in the 1930s came to be. "Locals" were defined as "Native Hawai'ian, Asian, and other residents" (4), and, in fact, during this case the term was first applied to Hawai'ians. The formation of this new identity is important in the telling of the individual and group narratives used throughout the text or telling of this story. Rosa chooses to use the word "story" instead of "history" in order to have more fluidity in his historical account. He states that there was a "prevailing silence" or even a lack of awareness about the case among local Hawai'ians up until the mid-1980s, when widespread interest was sparked (3). Rosa's interest in the "prevailing silence" contributed to his telling and re-telling of the story through the locals' perspectives, what he calls "the culture of history [. . .] a focus on the nature of historical storytelling" (3). A variety of empirical studies such as interviews and archival accounts were used in the preparation of the book, but to express the essence of his thesis, Rosa chose to put more effort into developing "a more organic approach" by "talking story" with people (3). He argues that the information from oral and performative

accounts through “talking story” brings a stronger, more cohesive story that allows storytellers to tell histories “at their own pace and in their own fashion” (5).

The first two chapters focus on how this new definition of Hawai’ian culture and identity emerged as the locals, despite their different ethnicities, navigated their experience through shared socio-economic statuses and languages, and how this process contrasted with the white or “haole” residents of Hawai’i. The distinction between peoples illustrates the struggle of power within the community and how this dynamic resulted in the way case had been presented in earlier accounts. Rosa shows that the portrayal of disorganization and delinquency among the non-white Hawai’ians was contrasted with life in the mainland United States, when sociological evidence suggests both groups were similar relative to the living conditions of many mainland cities (17). Distinctions like these informed the power structure of Hawaii at the time, and again, the portrayal of and reaction to the Massie-Kahahawai case. Geography is obviously a strong marker distinguishing social class any society. All of the so-called Kauluwela Boys were born and raised in Hawaii and thus were automatically assumed to be Massie’s assailants.

Chapter 2 also has a section on Massie’s voice and agency but here Rosa utilizes the term “alleged” rape. However, Rosa stresses that he does not mean to undermine the allegations or seriousness of rape, but he does want to explore more thoroughly how and why the stories of the accused men and Massie herself were told. Because it is such a sensitive topic, rape has the power to dissuade readers about the rest of his arguments because ultimately the alleged rape is perceived as the root cause of the entire case. Typically, it should not be the job of any author to explain every nuance of why they wrote what they did, but for this topic, Rosa could have given a more detailed explanation, especially if much of the intended audience is inclined to believe the alleged victim more than the alleged assailants. There is a short section on how Massie’s status as a privileged, upper class white woman in Hawai’i allowed her to play the role she did in the trial, but it could have been expanded. That would have been useful supplemental information for understanding why this case is ultimately so complex.

These first two chapters do illustrate well what the social structures of the time were like and how those structures created local identity. A reader unfamiliar with Hawai’i’s history, the role of power in shaping discourse or even culture, may take race and ethnicity at face value. However, it is important to understand that for Rosa these issues are not based purely on skin color, but rather on power structures, which themselves were the result of how the haoles got to Hawai’i in the first place. This does not lessen the impact of the ethnic and racial realities, but it does stress the realities of the situation at that time.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the reactions of many locals after the killing of Joseph Kahahawai, how the case was forgotten because of a newer, more sensational story, and how the conclusion of the trial proved satisfactory for continental Americans, but not for locals. Chapter 5 shows how its depiction in print and film contributed to the later understanding of the case, regardless of whether those depictions were works of fiction or non-fiction. Rosa also gives useful descriptions of the numerous interpretations of the case in the media. They are broken into time periods, which helps the reader better understand events, and how people over time viewed those events. At the end of the book, Rosa relates the rise of ethnic studies to the renewed, greater interest in the case. The epilogue and timeline are helpful in giving a more concise look at all of the, at times, difficult to grasp concepts that Rosa is dealing with. They provide some balance to a book that might confuse some readers while remaining true to the stories that were meant to be told.

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Rosa describes local identity as “a fluid, changing, and ongoing process of positioning” (60). This definition is important to the reader’s understanding of the whole case and its historical context because without it there can be perceived contradictions that might change the depiction and therefore the reader’s perception of the Hawai’ian locals. This is particularly significant when Rosa is explaining what “resistance” means. The term usually has a negative meaning, but it is crucial to realize what it means in the context of Hawai’ian locals. These sentiments are explored more in the epilogue, which clarifies many of the themes of the book and where Rosa asserts that he is not trying to romanticize Hawai’i further, or make it seem “special” from other places that have similar struggles and practices (104). Nonetheless, the local words, themes, and practices were critical in explaining the events and identities of the people in the story.

History typically remembers the powerholder’s side of the story, but re-telling events from the perspectives of others, especially the oppressed, victims, or even the perceived “bad guys” should be just as important, especially when these events are recent enough so that these “lost” stories can be retrieved. Rosa was conscientious about trying to “talk stories” not familiar too many of his intended readers, but perhaps he was not thorough enough for some of these stories to be fully understood in such a short text. Still, Rosa did not want to spend a lot of time on such concepts. He wanted to focus on the case itself and the telling of stories. I cannot speak for locals who have read the book or mainland Americans, but for me, based on my knowledge and experience, it was insightful, earnest, and well-balanced in explaining how these stories were produced. It more raised many questions about how texts such as these can and should be accepted as conventional scholarly works, especially if the research and methods are appropriate for those involved, for those people whose “story” is being told.” I strongly recommend *The Massie-Kahahawai Case and the Culture of History* for anyone interested in reading about (or better, “re-reading”) a fascinating, pivotal moment in Hawai’ian legal, social, and cultural history.