

## Dialogue

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*The Rhetoric of Free Association and Palau's Political Struggle*

RICHARD J. PARMENTIER

*Natives and Anthropologists: The Colonial Struggle*

HAUNANI-KAY TRASK

*Reply to Trask*

ROGER M. KEESING

*Text Bites and the R-Word: The Politics of Representing Scholarship*

JOCELYN LINNEKIN

*Reply to Trask**Roger M. Keesing*

Since Trask's vituperative commentary so strikingly exemplifies and hence reinforces many of the themes of my paper, my initial reaction was to decline to reply (other than, perhaps, to invite the reader to ponder which of us is a racist). However, I have been persuaded that some of the issues merit further debate and clarification.

With regard to my own politics, in relation to issues of past colonial invasion (including missionary invasion), present neocolonialism and global capitalism, gender, and the struggles of Third and Fourth World peoples, I have been consistent, outspoken, and unequivocal in precept and practice. I feel no need to defend my track record on these issues (it is at least a change to be criticized for being too reactionary instead of for being too radical). The stark "insider" versus "outsider" dichotomy drawn in Trask's rhetoric troubles me for other reasons. It strikes me as a great leap backward in what purports to be radical discourse, a quarter century out of date. The time is long past where those who are friends of Pacific Islanders and islands and those who are enemies can be sorted out on the basis of their genes or skin colors: there are plenty of "insiders," many with Swiss bank accounts, busily selling their forests, their minerals, their fish—the lives and environments of their village cousins and their own children and grandchildren—to foreign interests. The battle lines in the contemporary Pacific have more to do with issues of class and interest (as Epeli Hau'ofa has powerfully argued [1987]) than with issues of culture or skin color; in fact, cultural nationalist rhetoric is increasingly deployed by Pacific elites to camouflage these issues of power and interest.

The situation of indigenous peoples marginalized, pauperized, and dispossessed by massive colonial settlement—in Australia, New Zealand, and Kanaky as well as Hawai'i—is quite different from that of postcolonial states in the region; and their struggles for a measure of historical justice and contemporary power are desperate. Like all political struggles by

the disempowered, these must be carried on in the context of a reasoned assessment of where power lies and how it will be used (it does no good to demand Auckland or Sydney Harbour or Waikiki Beach back or try to shoot down airliners full of tourists with boomerangs). I have been unequivocal in my support for such struggles (as long as they have remained within reasonable constraints of *realpolitik*), and my paper was not intended to subvert them.

What I question is whether it is necessary to idealize and mythicize the cultural past as a Golden Age (in what purports to be study and revival of cultural traditions). Is it really necessary, if Hawaiians or Maori or Kanak are to develop positive pride and strengthened identity, to edit out human sacrifice, chiefly oppression, bloody wars, patriarchy? Is it really necessary to draw on Western-derived countercultural critiques in creating a mythicized Golden Age? Do we really have to imagine that the pre-European Pacific was a paradise of holistic healing, ecological reverence, love for the land, and communalism? Trask is a serious and intelligent scholar, who in other contexts has been wisely reflective about the contradictions between Fourth World political movements and the sexism within their ranks. Does she really have to suspend her critical judgment with regard to the past?

I am quite aware of the potential political contradictions and sensitivities that arise when “outsiders” represent the cultures and histories of indigenous Pacific Islanders, particularly those locked into subordinated Fourth World situations. In fifteen years in Australia, I have avoided engaging in Aboriginal research for precisely these reasons. I certainly claim no privileged expertise regarding the Hawaiian past, which Trask mistakenly believes to have been the subject of my paper.<sup>1</sup>

Again, Trask’s rhetoric hides some of the real issues. These have to do with class and power, not with skin color or cultural origins. Indigenous academics in the Pacific have risen to positions of considerable power, prestige, and privilege. Squarely situated within the establishment and sustained by institutional power and bourgeois life-styles they share with white colleagues, they are separated from their rural poor cultural cousins by wide gulfs of class interest, political power, perception, life experience, and material circumstance. It is not surprising that they seek to resolve these contradictions, to validate their right to represent “their” people, and to maintain senses of personal identity by invoking bonds of shared essence, racial and cultural. Perhaps Trask should more seriously reflect

on her own position before attacking mine—and Linnekin's—so vehemently.

In relation to my supposed ignorance of the devastation wrought along the frontiers of European expansion, I suggest that Trask read chapters 19 and 21 of my book *Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective* (1981); and that she peruse the long section on anthropology and colonialism on pages 481–499. My critique of the historical role of Christianity within the imperialist project particularly offends some *haole* readers, who write to the publisher complaining.

The question of missionaries underlines how complex the politics of culture have become in the Pacific, and how inapt and anachronistic Trask's rhetoric is. My critical observations regarding the mythological Fijian "culture" partly have to do with the place of Methodist Christianity in this ideology (and its use as an instrument of chiefly hegemony vis-à-vis fellow Fijians as well as Indo-Fijians). My great-great-grandfather Thomas Jaggar, who arrived as a Methodist missionary in Fiji in 1839, played a part in this process. I encourage Trask to try to dig up his remains for osteological analysis, although she will have to contend with the Fijian villagers who tend his grave and revere his memory.

In regard to genealogies, academic imperialism, and my supposed lack of respect for "native" peoples and their wisdom and cultures, I have been working recently at the feet of a (genuine) Pacific Island sage, Maenaa'adi of Furisi'ina (Malaita, Solomon Islands), recording a magnificent oral historical tradition preserved in epic chants and genealogies extending back almost a hundred generations. This, incidentally, is work being done at his behest and direction, to preserve his ancestral cultural heritage against threats of destruction (which come more directly from fellow Solomon Islanders hell bent on Christian Evangelism and development and personal profit at the expense of the environment than from "outsiders"). As with most of my recent writing on the Pacific, what will emanate from this will be textual accounts, autobiographical and cultural, which I will edit and translate on behalf of and under guidance of the indigenous authors. (Last year, two autobiographical accounts by Pacific Islanders I edited from oral narratives were launched [Fatnowna 1989; Fifi'i 1989]; I am working on another, by a Kwaio pagan woman.) And as in all my Solomons writings over the past fifteen years, any income it yields will go to the Islanders themselves. Perhaps here again it is Trask, not I, who should have done more homework.

*Note*

1 In fact, in the original version of my paper I made only passing and general reference to the Hawaiian situation; I expanded on this, mainly drawing on Linnekin's work, at the request of the editor (following the recommendations of reviewers), referring to materials sent to me in the Solomons, where I was doing fieldwork.

*References*

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