

Frank Marshall Davis in Hawai'i: Outsider Journalist Looking In

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Frank Marshall Davis (1905-1987) was a journalist, poet, expatriate, and resident of Hawai'i for almost forty years. As an outsider looking in, he functioned as a significant voice in documenting the progress of social movements in Hawai'i from a plantation- to a tourist-based economy.¹ In his weekly column, "Frank-ly Speaking," in the union newspaper the *Honolulu Record*, he acted as a commentator on the impact of the union movement on the plantation economy in the post-war Honolulu scene. As a major national journalist and former editor of the Associated Negro Press (ANP), Davis was able to analyze the changing configurations of ethnic groups, class structures and strategies of control. His keen observations of the imperialist forces and his subsequent fall in status due to his outspoken editorials seem a paradox in what he described as a "postcard paradise." His was a voice that inspired and threatened. His uniqueness as a black journalist and his middle-class status showed that Hawai'i was indeed one of the few places in the 1940s and 1950s where blacks held roles other than those of agricultural or service workers in a multi-ethnic setting.

Blacks in Hawai'i had a certain fluidity between several ethnic groups, which afforded Davis a unique platform from which to observe and discuss the consequences of the economy. He wrote of the parallels of laws and influences between the southern plantation system and plantations in Hawai'i, as well as parallels between blacks and Hawaiians. His insight into colonial techniques and strategies for dividing the minorities/oppressed groups, his ability to see beyond the binary racism so common in the continental US, and his documentation of discrimination and racism in Hawai'i, are a testament to Davis' role as a significant voice and witness in the historical process of Hawai'i's economic development, inter-group relationships, and changing social consciousness.

Before and After Arrival in Hawai'i

The obvious question is why a prominent African American writer and intellectual would choose to go to the Territory of Hawai'i in 1948 and not to Europe, Russia, or Africa, like so many of his black compatriots. Most

African Americans were leaving the Islands after the war to return to their African American communities. Davis was arriving. Why? The local Hawai'i newspapers thought they knew. In December 1948, several articles in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* and *Honolulu Advertiser* announced the imminent arrival of Davis and his Caucasian wife Helen, then their delay, and finally their belated arrival. Several were accompanied by photos of the two. The press presented Davis as a successful journalist, and as a poet and a recipient of a 1937 Julius Rosenwald Fellowship. The newspapers wrote contradictory stories on the purpose of their trip. "Executive Editor of ANP Is Due Tonight" (*Honolulu Advertiser* 1948a) says that Davis "is in Honolulu for a visit that will combine a vacation with business[, that he] is planning a story on racial groups in the Islands [and that] Davis also plans to visit army and navy posts." "Negro Press Executive Here" (*Honolulu Advertiser* 1948b) says that Davis "is here on an inspection and vacation tour of the islands [and] will tour army and navy installations and other territorial institutions." "Davis Considers Hawai'i Advanced in Democracy" (*Honolulu Star-Bulletin* 1948) says the Davises are in Hawai'i "for a visit of not less than four months. Davis will write a series of articles on his observations of the island scene and also will work on a book of poetry which he hopes will capture the spirit of the Islands in verse." But the photo caption accompanying the article says the Davises are "in Honolulu for an indefinite visit." Davis' wife was presented as an artist, writer, and executive editor of a national press agency, who planned "to do watercolors of the islands during her stay."

Other citizens of Honolulu, however, knew that Davis was more than a civic figure. Henry Epstein, a local labor leader familiar with Davis' mainland reputation said in an interview just before Davis' death,

What I remember about Frank was that he was a very prominent and well-known black poet who was very highly respected in Chicago. You'd see his picture once in a while on the society page of the Chicago newspapers and when they had fund raisers for progressive organizations in Chicago, if Frank Marshall Davis was coming you had a real attraction, a prominent person that would help bring people into the event. [...] You saw him in what's now called civil rights affairs. [...] I don't think Frank was recognized as the prominent person that he was back in Chicago (*Rice and Roses* 1986(2):1,5).

Epstein was right. In Hawai'i, few people accorded Davis the status and respect that was his due, partly because they were unfamiliar with his past, and partly because it was a time when people were afraid to take risks under the shadow of McCarthyism.

Davis' own reasons for coming to Hawai'i were less overtly political. In an interview shortly before his death for the television series *Rice and Roses*, he recounted how the internationally famed singer Paul Robeson – whom he knew from Chicago and the progressive movement there – influenced him to come to Hawai'i: "[Robeson] had been over here the previous year on a concert set up for the International Longshoremen's & Warehousemen's Union (ILWU). And he was telling me how much he liked it and he said he was going to come back every year. He never did show up again. But anyway, he was instrumental in helping me to form my desire to come over" (*Rice and Roses* 1986). The welcome proved to be impressive. When the Davises first arrived, the extensive media coverage made them feel accepted. They were stopped on the street and warmly greeted by many local residents. He and his wife were offered rides when waiting for a bus, and were invited to dine at the Willows, which refused to serve most African Americans at that time. Davis in short sensed that Hawai'i would be a relaxed and friendly place to live. He said in an interview, "Within a week I had decided to settle here permanently, although I knew it would mean giving up what prestige I had acquired back in Chicago where I was now appearing each year in *Who's Who in the Midwest* and had been told by the editors that in 1949 my biography would be included in *Who's Who in America*" (Davis 1992:323). Clearly, Davis was willing to sacrifice a great deal to escape the tensions and demands of his experiences on the Mainland, for he concluded that "the peace and dignity of living in Paradise would compensate for finding a way other than as a newspaperman to make a living" (*ibid.*).

In certain ways, Hawai'i was a welcome change. Davis, for instance, marveled that he had many white friends in the Islands:

I was somebody who came from the same general environment and over-all background. At first it was shocking to hear Caucasians tell me what "we" must do when, on the Mainland, they would likely say "you people." Many whites of considerable residence here are as bitter about racism as any of us and are glad to live in a place where overt prejudice

is not customary. I have known *haoles* [whites] to go back home for a long visit but return ahead of schedule because they couldn't stand the attitudes of their old friends (1992:317).

But Davis almost immediately came to realize that some of these "strong friendships with many *haoles*" developed because he was not Asian, and in fact, his anomalous position as an African American in Hawai'i would become the source not only of his own sense of Hawai'i as both a multi-ethnic and colonialist culture, but also of his outspoken sympathies and opinions in print, which would markedly affect his own life in the Islands. And yet, because he felt that, with his arrival in the Islands, he had at last found dignity and respect as a man, as a human being, Davis proved slow to complain. He had resolved that even politics was never to take this dignity away from him again.

The ILWU and the *Honolulu Record*

His expectation that he could not support himself through his writing soon proved accurate. Although when he arrived in Hawai'i, his welcome led him to assume that finding a job would not be difficult, especially with all of his experience and expertise in journalism, he quickly discovered his mistake. When he tried to get a salaried job with a large local daily, word had apparently gotten around that Davis was pro-labor, and the newspaper that was supported by the Big Five (American Factors, Theo H. Davies, Alexander & Baldwin, Castle & Cooke [Dole], and C. Brewer and Co.), ignored him. The word was in fact correct, for Davis' initial contacts within Hawai'i all had extremely strong ILWU ties. Paul Robeson's own Hawai'i acquaintances, which he passed on to Davis, insured that "when I came over, one of the first things that I got involved with – well, I met all the ILWU brass, Jack Hall and all of them, and I went – they had both of us over to various functions for them – Harriet Bouslog was also a good friend" (*Rice and Roses* 1986(5):29-30; see Beechert 1985:227). Davis soon realized that he had arrived at a very important moment in Hawai'i labor history. The huge ILWU strike was imminent, pitting labor against the Big Five. For Davis, this was the kind of political ferment and struggle between the powerful and powerless that he thrived upon:

When we arrived in 1948, the Big Five had an iron grip on island economy. Organized labor led by the ILWU with Jack Hall at the helm was still

struggling to break its hold. Groups of Oriental businessmen were forming cooperatives and attacking from another angle (Davis 1992:313-14).

On the eve of the famous ILWU strike of 1949, the big issue was wage parity. Labor (non-white) was demanding from management (white) equal pay with workers on the West Coast. The white executives and employers were starting to fight back against the union, and even their wives organized the "broom brigade," an anti-labor group to oppose the strike (see Zalburg 1979:250-55). The wives named themselves *Imua*, a Hawaiian word which means to move forward, and they tried to convince the wives of the striking workers to side with management and join a presumed better life. They also launched a publicity campaign supported by the commercial newspapers accusing the ILWU of threatening to starve the people of Hawai'i with the impending strike, because much of the food came from the United States.

Davis and his wife both publicly aligned themselves with the ILWU. In response to the "broom brigade," Helen picketed with other labor wives. This did little to endear them to the power elite in the islands, who controlled public images. As Ah Quon McElrath recalls,

Generally, the community didn't look upon trade unions with a great deal of love and affection. Besides which the Izuka² pamphlet about Communism in Hawai'i had just been issued so there was fuel added to the fire which had started during the 1946 strike when they said that outsiders were coming in and taking over [...] Hawai'i and destroying the sugar industry as well as the pineapple industry (*Rice and Roses* 1986(24):1).³

Since as Davis recalls, "Not too long before my arrival, all Democrats were tarred with this same brush by the ruling Republican clique" (1992:323). His problems multiplied when it became clear that there were concerted efforts to brand him an outside instigator, and even a communist. "The local establishment, which evidently had been given a file on me by the FBI, flipped," Davis recalls, "I was a Communist and a subversive and a threat to Hawai'i" (*ibid.*).

The ILWU sought to unify the workers and encouraged them to transcend their diverse ethnicities and cultures:

When the ILWU started organizing [...] they were advised that they must have an inter-racial leadership or the ILWU would not charter them or would not help them organize. [...] This spirit of all the people working

together is what built up the ILWU and it's what gave them a lot of strength (*Rice and Roses* 1986(2):9).

And one of the strongest and most sustaining forces for this strength and solidarity would prove to be a publication which Davis' previous experience made him perfectly suited to help.

In speaking of the origins of this paper, Epstein notes:

The *Honolulu Record* was started by Koji Ariyoshi and Ed Robo with the help of the ILWU and the idea was to have an independent newspaper which was friendly to the labor movement and could present the other side of the news. [...] They had a lot of articles that you wouldn't read anywhere else (*Rice and Roses* 1986(2):1,5).

Davis himself recalls that even before he left for Hawai'i, "[Robeson] and Bridges who was head of the ILWU and the CIO in the Pacific Region,⁴ suggested that I should get in touch with the *Honolulu Record* and see if I could do something for them" (*Rice and Roses* 1986).

When Davis became a columnist for the *Honolulu Record*, the newspaper was just beginning to document the imminent strike of the ILWU and the subsequent breaking up of the monopolistic power of the Big Five over the various immigrant labor groups, including the Japanese – who were the most powerful and radical – Chinese, Filipinos, and Portuguese. As Davis later commented in an interview:

During this time when there was this controversy between the ILWU and the Big Five firms, I was obviously on the side of labor [...] and the strike was something that was opposed by virtually all of the haoles of importance around here and many of the oriental business men [...] who had a vested interest in keeping things going with the Big Five (*Rice and Roses* 1986(9):52).

Davis observed how the ILWU publicized itself through a daily radio program and labor newspapers such as the *Honolulu Record*. It offered a pro-labor viewpoint to answer the conservative *Advertiser*, the *Star-Bulletin*, and a radio show by celebrity DJ Aku. Davis, with his vanguard ideas and deep understanding of class struggle, and his ability to discern the local ethnic struggles and exploitation, was quick to become a writer for the *Honolulu Record*. Or in his own words, "Not long after arriving in Hawai'i, I began writing

a regular weekly column for the *Honolulu Record*, supported mainly by the ILWU membership, and was openly friendly with its leadership" (Davis 1992:323). This was hardly a career move, since "The *Record*, of course, was not financially able to add me to its payroll" (ibid.). But Davis felt an affinity with Koji Ariyoshi and Ed Rohrbough, "who were its editorial mainstays" (ibid.). Because the *Honolulu Record* was created to provide an alternative perspective to the news, Davis found it to be the medium through which he could critique the socio-political structure of the Territory of Hawai'i and keep in touch with the common people. Therefore, when Ariyoshi offered him a column, which became known as "Frank-ly Speaking," Davis couldn't resist.

Davis as Columnist

What Davis brought to the *Honolulu Record* was an acute sense of race relations and class struggle throughout the United States and the world. In his column, for instance, Davis openly discussed imperialism and colonialism. He compared Hawai'i with other colonies and attacked the press for its racist propaganda. He identified and connected the non-white people of different cultures and colors as victims of exploitation. One "Frank-ly Speaking" column dated January 12, 1950 states:

To the people of Hawai'i, Africa is a far-away place, almost another world. And yet in many ways it is as close as your next door neighbor. The Dark Continent suffers from a severe case of the disease known as colonialism which Hawai'i has in a much milder form. The sole hope of the dying empires of Western Europe is intensified exploitation and continued slavery of African workers through US money and munitions. There are strikes in Africa against the same kinds of conditions that cause strikes in Hawai'i.

Maybe you think of Africans as black savages, half-naked, dancing to the thump-thump of toms-toms in jungle clearings, if you think of them at all. You may have gotten your impressions through the propaganda of press, radio and films, intended to sell the world on the idea that Africans are inferior and backward. It comes from the same propaganda mill that sells Mainlanders the idea that Japanese and Chinese and Filipinos and other people of different cultures and colors are also inferior and backward (1949-52 II(25):8).

More typically, though, Davis drew on his own experiences on the mainland. He often grounded his critiques by referring to contradictions between social practice and American constitutional ideals. In one column dated Jan. 19, 1950, for example, Davis writes that we "should bring the Bill of Rights back to life in our constitution":

It has been a casualty of the cold war, yet it is as important today as it was when it was first framed. For, to paraphrase Lincoln, we have come to the evil day when none but the supporters of our bi-partisan foreign policy are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That is not the kind of democracy Washington and Jefferson built in the young days of our nation; it is a dictatorship of thought absolutely repugnant to our national traditions. Let Hawai'i lead the way back to Americanism (1949-52 II(26):8).

His eye for class analysis, and his former experience with institutional racism, led him to discern quickly the exploitative role of big business and landowners in the lives of the ethnic non-white minorities. He had already written an editorial on the Massie case (Chapin 1996) when he was living in Chicago, so he knew that Hawai'i residents experienced virulent episodes of racism. Once in Hawai'i, he soon recognized various ways racism permeated throughout society. He became familiar with the subtle forms of discrimination, and on occasion the more blatant ones as well; for example, the segregated housing facilities at Pearl Harbor, and particularly Civilian Housing Areas 2 and 3 (see Takara 1990:202). He learned about the hostilities between Okinawans and Japanese, and various other inter- and intra-ethnic group prejudices and discrimination (Davis 1992:314).

He observed the discrimination in certain bars and restaurants, and the reluctance of the territorial legislature to pass a Civil Rights law, because by passing such a law the myth of Hawai'i as a racial paradise would be shattered (Davis 1992:313). Soon, within his columns, he was speaking about these matters. He attacked big business, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) witch hunts, thought control, the loyalty oath, fascism, the Smith Act, white supremacy, Jim Crow, the War Machine, imperialism, racism and prejudice, reactionaries, discrimination in the selection of Supreme Court appointees, dictatorships, and ultra-conservative wealthy people. He ex-

posed unemployment, land and housing problems, blacklisting, and the exploitation of minority groups. He espoused freedom, radicalism, solidarity, labor unions, due process, peace, affirmative action, civil rights, Negro History week, and true democracy to fight imperialism, colonialism, and white supremacy. He urged coalition politics. He called for people to investigate the real threats to democracy, such as big business interests, repression, censorship, thought control, the war machine, anti-communist hysteria, unemployment, reactionaries and fascism, segregation and racism. He called for the ordinary person to fight for democracy, to revise the land and tax laws. He exhorted the people of Hawai'i to wake up from indifference, to challenge police brutality, to support democratic politics, to gain economic power from land reform.

In speaking of his writing and influence, Ah Quon McElrath notes in an interview:

[H]e wrote some very prescient articles about race relations in Hawai'i and given the fact that Frank, a black married to a white, had come from that kind of situation in Chicago, it's utterly amazing how he was able to size up the race relations here in the [...] Territory of Hawai'i. As a matter of fact in the first article that he wrote, I have the date here, January 13, 1949, he talked about Anglo-Saxon culture being not better, but different from Hawaiian culture, Japanese culture, Chinese culture, and he talked a little bit about the typical reaction of the whites to different cultures [...] started a whole series of articles on race relations. As a matter of fact, one of his articles ended with this phrase. "These beautiful islands can still chart their own future." I'm not sure that Frank would agree that the future which we have since charted has been a good one or a bad one (*Rice and Roses* 1986(24):3).

Nor was the course he charted a particularly comfortable one for himself, since it so clearly revealed the racial underpinning of so many supposedly "social" or "economic" problems. As McElrath recalls:

Indeed, during this period most whites, commonly called *haole* in Hawai'i – descendants of missionaries, merchants, and/or landowners – had a colonialist attitude, and looked down on the local Hawaiian people and immigrants who worked for them. Class and ethnicity were well-defined and obvious (*Rice and Roses* 1986(24):3).

Epstein noted, "When I first came to Hawai'i, my understanding was the banks had dual salary schedules and that Haoles had one rate of pay and local people had another. I don't know whether it was justified by classification or how they covered it up but it was commonly accepted" (*Rice and Roses* 1986(2):2).

Traditionally, haole were discouraged from seeking employment in subservient roles and were permitted neither to work as laborers on the vast sugar and pineapple plantations, nor for the most part to join the trade unions. Management kept the different ethnic groups in segregated housing areas with discriminatory salary schedules, playing one group against the other. Davis himself was certainly cognizant that the whites were still in control in Hawai'i, "the acting governor at that time was Governor Ingram Stainback, a native of Tennessee, and his unofficial attitude often coincided with that of the many southern whites imported to work for the military" (1992:313).

Davis was very familiar with how civil rights issues often worked themselves out in racial terms. He relentlessly focused on the socio-economic and political problems which he observed and could expertly analyze due to his twenty years of newspaper experience, labor union work, familiarity with global politics, and many years of experience browsing thirty-five newspapers a day. Moreover, Davis was used to hostility from the white community; he had always been an outsider, a *malihini*. He was not easily thwarted. He was not intimidated by the FBI – although his influence was diluted by its discriminatory practices and harassment – since he had previous experience with it in Chicago at the ANP, where he had developed a strategy for giving them misinformation (*Rice and Roses* 1986(5):28). "I was vice-chairman of the Chicago Civil Liberties Committee," Davis recalled, "and so the Civil Rights Congress was in existence when I came over here. And we were, the local civil rights chapter, was affiliated with the Civil Rights Congress, which was another thing which did not sit well with the powers that were" (*Rice and Roses* 1986(6):34).

Not surprisingly, such activities were not appreciated by the establishment in Hawai'i. Though welcomed at first, when Davis turned his past experience on present-day Hawai'i, those in power became upset. This was especially the case when he advocated the creation of a union or committee of the various ethnic groups, often by illustrating how in the United States

African Americans had worked together with other groups in coalition politics to get things done. The result, predictably, was accusations of anti-haole bias and hatred:

In my column I tried to spell out the similarities between Afro-Americans and local people and local leaders thought my fight against white supremacy meant I was anti-white. I opposed any and all white imperialism and backed the nations seeking independence following World War II. I so incensed members of the White Power Structure that I became the constant radio target of an anti-labor organization known as IMUA, formed to combat the long waterfront strike in 1949, and whose membership was overwhelmingly haole. Even the two dailies were not above taking occasional potshots at me (1992:323-24).

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, many who were opposed to the status quo were also considered Communist, but such labeling did not deter Davis from continuing his path as a social realist, a militant voice in a gentle land. In a remarkably brave move, he even attacked the HUAC for failing to investigate flagrant abuses of democracy such as restricted housing, and for wasting its time by protecting the interests of big business. In his "Frank-ly Speaking" column, dated December 28, 1949, he notes:

The Hawai'i un-American Activities Commission has an excellent chance to break with tradition and win respect for such investigations, by probing the activities and programs of powerful groups that use color, religion or national origin as a basis for denying equality to all.

The matter of restricted housing should be thoroughly aired and those who perpetrate this evil practice should be forcefully exposed. Naturally, it would hit some of the Territory's most influential persons, many who dominate our economy. Is the commission willing to step on big toes or will it confine its investigations to the weak and powerless?

Restrictive housing covenants hit the majority of the Territory's population, since most are non-haole. In the year that I've been here, I have been blocked by this evil and totally un-American practice. Twice it came up when I sought rental units; last week it was raised again as I contemplated purchase of a home in an area off Kaneohe Bay Drive. It was Castle leasehold property and restricted, I was told. And so the deal was off (1949-52 II(22):16).

And yet, it was precisely because such exposés and attacks seemed to be targeting the white power structure that Davis was able to serve as a spokesman for many who were neither white nor African American. Davis wrote about this phenomenon – appreciatively, but with clear insight as well:

Despite propaganda spread by southern whites imported to work for Uncle Sam during World War II and the unofficial attitude of the territorial administration then headed by Governor Stainback, a native of Tennessee, local people generally were ready to accept Afro Americans at face value. Of course many had strongly warped ideas, drawn from traditional stereotypes perpetuated by press, movies and radio, but in the final analysis they based attitudes on personal relationships. I soon learned many Japanese went through a sizing up period when blacks moved into a predominantly Japanese neighborhood or they came in contact at work, but when they decided to accept you it was on a permanent basis, not as a fair weather friend. Dark Hawaiians tended to dislike Afro Americans as a group (many lived in mortal fear white tourists would mistake them for Negroes) but developed strong friendships with individuals; Hawaiians are traditionally warm and outgoing (1992:314).

From very early on he felt this Hawaiian support after he invested in property on the windward side of O'ahu – first in Kahalu'u, then in Hau'ula where the family remained for seven years with the addition of several children. Davis seemed to feel welcome in Hau'ula – and only moved to the leeward Kalihi Valley in 1956 for its convenience and proximity to hospitals, schools, and work in Honolulu. He recalls:

For seven years Helen and I lived at Hauula, a predominantly Hawaiian village on the ocean some 31 miles from Honolulu. When I began driving daily to town and back, local boys who knew my schedule often waited beside the highway, sometimes for as long as three hours, to flag me down and ask questions about their personal lives, explaining, "you're not haole so I know I can trust you." In Hauula I joined the Democratic precinct club, virtually ran the organization and was sent to the state convention by the predominantly Hawaiian membership who told me that since I was educated and articulate, I could speak for them (1992:316).

When Davis became well-known for his writing for the *Honolulu Record*, he found this support only increased:

I found that many of the people around here [...] were quite [...] on my side. And I would sometimes be in my car, and I would stop at a light and, this was after I was writing this column for the *Honolulu Record*, [...] an Oriental businessman [...] would tell me that he recognized me from my picture which accompanied my column, and he'd say, "You know, you're writing exactly what I would say if I could. I just don't know how to say it." So therefore I got a lot of friendships which grew that way (*Rice and Roses* 1986(9):52).

So too did support from less likely sources – all because the implications of Davis' writing did point out the haole dominance in Hawai'i. His columns later had the effect of getting him customers for his paper and office goods business, since Asian businessmen appreciated that he had defied "the big haoles."

With this kind of support, and with the examples of experience, Davis came to advocate reform measures which either took years to achieve, or are still challenges for the state. Land reform laws⁵ were finally enacted in the 1960s to resolve some of the problems which Davis addressed and spoke out about in the 1940s and 1950s. And his comments on the nature of Hawai'i's agricultural economy, and the future it must move toward, sound very familiar today, at a time when such issues as lease-to-fee conversion and sovereignty for Hawaiians are so centrally a part of public discourse. One column dated January 19, 1950, for instance, states that

Provision should be made for breaking up the big estates which control so much of this territory and force Hawai'i to depend upon a sugar and pineapple economy. Small independent farmers need to have access to land at a reasonable fee so that they can engage in diversified farming and thus make the people less at the mercy of the shipping industry and importing monopolies for food. For we have reached a period in our history when not only political and social rights need to be spelled out, but economic rights as well. (1949-52 II(26):8).

Other Modes of Comment: Poetry

One of the most important sources of information about Davis' positions during this time comes from poetry written long after his columns in the *Honolulu Record*. Of several poems about Hawai'i, two are exceptional – "Tale of Two Dogs" and the still unpublished "This is Paradise" – because Davis

addresses the class and ethnic problems in Hawai'i. In those two poems, he focuses on the exploitation of the indigenous Hawaiians and immigrant workers by the haole oligarchy.

"Tale of Two Dogs" attacks United States imperialism in a historical poem about the sugar and pineapple industries:

Then the Strangers came;
They loosed their chained terriers
Of pineapple and sugar cane;
Sent them boldly into the yard
To sniff with eager green noses
At the sleeping old.
Long since
Pine and Cane
Have taken over the front lawn.
Snapping impatiently at obstructing ankles;
They run between
The tall still legs of the motionless mountains
As if they originated here
And the silent ancients
Were usurpers.
Here in this cultivated place
Growing the soft brown rose of Polynesia
The dogs have scratched
Digging for the buried pot of cash returns
Killing the broken bush
Under the flying dirt
of greed and grief.
. . . There is none so patient
As a tired mountain drowsing in the sun;
There is no wrath so great
As that of a mountain outraged
Destroying the nipping dogs
Loosed on the front lawn
By the Strangers
(Davis 1987:4-5).

The accusatory voice, the exposure of the raw power of the usurpers, and the suggestion of revenge make this poem powerful, especially in contrast with the ancient silence of the motionless mountains.

"This is Paradise" is an epic five-section poem. Davis offers an ironic travelogue in which a superficial tourist from Iowa might find a quaint, exotic paradise peopled with friendly, peaceful, prismatic natives content to serve. In the second section of the poem, he reveals the "soiled slip" of the real Hawai'i behind the props and stage setting: "Captain Cook . . . sweeping over the old way / inundating the ancient gods / flooding the sacred soil of custom and tradition" (1986:n.p.). He speaks of the missionaries as "magicians, the conjure men of Christianity / placed the vanishing cloth of Mother Hubbards on the women / Then whoosh and presto / Nudity into nakedness." He points to the irony that: "Now that it was uncivilized to kill by spear or club, guns became a symbol of progress" and at the end of Part II he writes:

The missionaries came with Bibles
 The heathen natives had the land
 Now the natives are no longer heathen,
 They have the Bible and Jesus
 and in this equitable trade –
 This oh so reasonable swap
 The missionaries got the land. . . .
 (Davis 1986:n.p.).

In Part III, Davis begins his critique of the Big Five: "Under the manure of the missionaries / sprouted the Big Five / Time was / When the Big Five had God on their payroll. . . . But that was before the Union" (1986:n.p.). He proceeds to describe the struggle between the ILWU and the Big Five; the plain people finally become freed from fear but still remain victims of poverty.

In Part IV, Davis speaks lovingly of the ethnic mix of the inhabitants of the island but adds irony. A haole tourist from Birmingham "Went home after two days of his intended month: / 'You can take these Goddamned islands,' He told friends in Dixie / And shove them up your ass / I don't like Hawai'i – / Too many niggers there" (1986:n.p.). Davis points out the divisive irony of color as a dark Hawaiian speaks to a lemon-light Negro using the expression "boy" in describing his best friend who was an African American in the army. Later

Davis uses Asians in the poem to ridicule the "funny kind names" of the haole. The more subtle problems of miscegenation are addressed when two haole parents referring to the Japanese bride of their son say "It's all right to sleep with 'em / But for Christ sake / Why do you have to marry 'em?" The bride subsequently returns to the Islands.

In another ironic passage, the Keakana family goes to the beach on the weekend to fish, "And the tourists from Topeka riding around the island in the prancing buses smile pinkly and murmur: 'How quaint, how carefree the Hawaiians are, not a worry in the world, nothing to do but loaf and fish just like their ancestors'" (1986:n.p.). Davis finishes the vignette with the comment that John Keakana weighs his fish to sell and to eat in order to "stretch monthly pay within \$40 of what the social scientists call necessary for minimum health standards." Davis reveals the low standard of living and poverty which a typical Native Hawaiian family might be confronted with in contrast to the tourist-oriented, technological society in which they find themselves in modern times, and in contrast to their original relationship to the land in the Islands.

In Part V of "This is Paradise," Davis satirizes the cliché that there is no race prejudice in Hawai'i, creating imaginary scenes where skin color and ethnic identity are equated with attitudes of superiority and inferiority:

One week in the country
And the navy wife phones her landlord:
"Across the street
Lives a bunch of dirty Hawaiians;
Next door on our right
A family of lousy Japs;
On the other side
A house full of slant-eyed Chinks;
And in front of us
On our very same lot
A white bitch married to a nigger –
I want our rent money back"
(1986:n.p.).

Davis ruthlessly exposes the color line in Hawai'i and the racism in Paradise brought by the white Americans, and for that he did not find, or in the case of this poem did not even seek, an audience.

Davis' Hawai'i Legacy

Was there any way that Davis, as an African American man in Hawai'i, could remain unconventional, radical, and defiant in the face of strong political and economic machines, and be financially successful? Was there any way to maintain his political views and aggressive nature and prosper with no allegiance to a power base in the community? The answer is an unequivocal no. Unfortunately, no significant African American community existed in Hawai'i to provide Davis with emotional and moral support, and an expanded audience and market for his writing. Also, because he was still concerned with the issues of freedom, racism, and equality, he lacked widespread multi-cultural support. Many islanders felt economic issues were more important – or they simply dared not challenge the system again after the strike, and risk their jobs, security, and well-being, since most had come to Hawai'i as immigrants and had only recently moved into a tenuous middle-class status.

One can only imagine Davis' frustrations at his inability to become a successful writer in Hawai'i after his promising beginnings in Atlanta and Chicago. He rarely complained, but he must have felt incomplete, if not bitter, when he found dignity but not freedom to develop his potential and lead the distinguished life to which he was accustomed. Considering the controversial subject matter of Davis' writing, it is little wonder that some whites looked askance at his presence in the Islands. He worked quietly, he wrote even when he no longer published his writings, and he talked with those who came to visit him – always seeking to present the truth of his vision, confident that social justice and human dignity would finally prevail. Indeed, despite his radical rhetoric, Davis was optimistic that good relations between ethnic groups could and would lead to a better world.

Davis was a pioneer in Hawai'i in the sense that he was a tireless witness recording the race and class history of his time, thinking of himself not as a local person, but rather as an expatriate who found a community which accepted him, and a personal level of human dignity and peace which he treasured. If Davis did not succeed financially, why did he not succeed in the literary arena and gain status and renown? Did Davis eventually tire of carrying the race struggle and protest message on his shoulders, or did he simply carry his battle to another level? Although certainly not "successful" in the tradi-

tional, capitalistic sense of the word, could the life of Davis be said to end in defeat? What constitutes defeat?

It can be argued that Davis escaped defeat like a trickster, playing dead only to arise later and win the race, although the politics of defeat were all around him. If society seemed to defeat him by denying him financial rewards, publication, and status, he continued to write prolifically. He stood by his principle that the only way to achieve social equality was to acknowledge and discuss publicly the racial and ethnic dynamics in all their complexity situated in an unjust society. He provided a bold, defiant model for writers to hold on to their convictions and articulate them.

His testimony remains. The social criticism and perceptive analysis are just as relevant today when the conditions of exploitation continue to thrive, and deprive many people of color, minorities, and the poor. ♦

Notes

1. For further information on the labor movement and transition of Hawai'i to a tourist-based economy, see Beechert (1985:225,285).
2. Ichiro Izuka was a Longshore leader on Kaua'i at Port Allen in the ILWU strike. For further information, see Beechert (1985:278,282).
3. For further information on McElrath's role in the Hawai'i Labor Movement, see Zalburg (1979:60,283).
4. For further information on Harry Bridges, the ILWU, and the CIO in the Pacific Region, see Beechert (1985:228).
5. For further discussion on the Land Reform Laws and the Maryland Bill, see Cooper and Daws (1985:405,411).

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