

“Hawaiian at Heart” and Other Fictions

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WHO’S A HAWAIIAN?

When the Hawaiian people lost our national sovereignty through the illegal invasion and overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i in 1893 and our subsequent annexation by the United States of America in 1898, we also lost control over the meaning of “Hawaiian” identity. In the forcible transformation from nation to American colony to American state, the meaning of “Hawaiian” became ambiguous, as residents of the Territory of Hawai‘i, and then of the state, began to be called “Hawaiian” along with the indigenous Hawaiian people. The terms “Native Hawaiian” and “Kānaka Maoli” are often used today to ensure accurate recognition of who is being discussed, but “Native Hawaiian” carries its own colonial baggage.

In 1993, on the 100th anniversary of the overthrow, the United States Congress issued a Joint Senate Resolution apologizing for the US role in the overthrow and admitting that “the indigenous Hawaiian people never directly relinquished their claims to their inherent sovereignty as a people or over their national lands to the United States, either through their monarchy or through a plebiscite or referendum.” President Bill Clinton signed the measure on 23 November 1993 as Public Law 103–150, declaring that the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i on 17 January 1893 had been illegal; that it had occurred with the participation of agents and citizens of the United States; and that it had suppressed the inherent sovereignty of the Native Hawaiian people and deprived Native Hawaiians of our rights to self-determination. Notably, this legislation defines Hawaiians as the “aboriginal people who inhabited the Hawaiian Islands prior to the arrival of Captain James Cook in 1778 and their descendants”; there is no mention of the blood quantum restrictions imposed by the US Congress

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of the 1920s in defining Native Hawaiians as only those with 50 percent or more Native Hawaiian ancestry.

The strength of American ideas about “race” and “blood” is problematic for the indigenous conception of Hawaiian identity because these worldviews are not compatible. The blood quantum ideology underlying the 1920s US Congress definition of “Native Hawaiian” was imported from US misdealings with American Indians. Historically, whenever there has been a discussion of “blood” in the United States, the issue of property is somewhere in the picture, whether Indians’ and Hawaiians’ land rights and sovereignty entitlements are being restricted on the basis of “too little” blood, or African Americans are being defined as property on the basis of “too much” blood (the famous “one-drop” rule of black identity). J Kēhaulani Kauanui has written at length about the congressional machinations surrounding the creation of legal definitions of Hawaiian identity and its concomitant entitlements.¹

The indigenous conception of Hawaiian identity is very different. Hawaiian identity lies in a genealogical relationship to ‘aumakua (ancestral spirit), ‘āina (the land), and kānaka (other Hawaiians). Hawaiians are linked through ‘aumākua, ancestral spirits, and through mākua, our parents. Hawaiians have a responsibility to mālama the ‘āina (care for the land), and the land thus cares for us. Our genealogies explain our relations to other Hawaiians and—most importantly—where we came from. Though these elements may be interpreted differently, with them we are Hawaiian no matter what *else* we might be. Without these elements, there are no Hawaiians. Concepts such as “part” and “full,” 50 percent, or more and less than 50 percent, are colonial constructions that threaten to divide Hawaiians from each other.²

The (illegal) incorporation of Hawai‘i as the fiftieth of the United States in 1959 brought more mainstream US attention to the islands, but Hawai‘i and Hawaiians remained exotic unknowns. Tourism and entertainment have been the vectors of information exchange between the islands and the continent. The history of Hawai‘i and its colonization remains unfamiliar to most non-Hawaiians. The curriculum of the US educational system does not generally include a discussion of the US imperial past or present. Even attempts at counter-hegemonic education, such as the ethnic studies movement in the United States, rarely if ever examine in detail the colonization of Hawai‘i, Puerto Rico, Guam, and “American” Sāmoa, or consider their central relation to the histories of slavery and Indian genocide, which are more commonly explored. Authors of high school social stud-

ies textbooks remain content to tell a story of the happy fiftieth state, whose diverse peoples are full of aloha, engaged in tourism, and growing pineapples. US residents' mainstream cultural exposure to images of Hawai'i and its residents has largely been limited to travel brochures and TV shows like *Hawaii 5-0* and *Magnum P.I.* in the 1970s and 80s, and *Survivor* today. Cable programming on *Nick at Nite* has introduced a whole new generation to the "secret kahuna curse" raised when the *Brady Bunch* went to Hawai'i.

LOCAL VERSUS HAWAIIAN

The most widespread American mythology about contemporary and historical Hawai'i revolves around the vision of the melting pot, a multicultural paradise where elements from every group combine into a rich whole that all can share. What is true is the complexity and strength of a "local" identity forged in shared (though not identical) oppression in the plantation work economy by immigrants from a number of cultures and countries including Japan, Puerto Rico, Scotland, China, Germany, Portugal, and more.

The pleasure of this vision erases a violent, coercive, and tragic history. The multiplicity of races and cultures in contemporary Hawai'i was born in the deliberate attempt by plantation owners to divide and conquer their workforce. Differences in language and culture were meant to prevent cross-racial organizing and solidarity among workers. This multiplicity of culture was also built on the bones of dead Hawaiians. By the most conservative estimates, the importation of diseases from Cook's men and all the westerners who followed killed 90 percent of the Native Hawaiian population within a hundred years. The population collapse, from 300,000–800,000 Hawaiians in 1778 to fewer than 40,000 in the 1890s, created a gaping emptiness that was filled with non-Hawaiian immigrants (Stannard 1989).

Before the widespread renaissance of Hawaiian culture and identity, "local" and "Hawaiian" were often used interchangeably, or to be more accurate, "local" stood in for "Hawaiian," and "Hawaiian" disappeared. Hawaiian media producer and activist Paul Kealoha Blake recalled that in his childhood in 1950s Kailua, the name "Hawaiian" only appeared in relation to crime, violence, and poverty (pers comm, March 1993). Local culture is firmly grounded in key indigenous elements—Hawaiian culture's inclusivity and openness to innovation and change; the structure of

Hawaiian thought that underlies “pidgin” English, and most importantly, the relationship to the land. “Local”-ness is about where you are from, and where you are.

But a troubling paradox occurs for those former locals who are forced, along with Native Hawaiians, to leave the islands in search of a job or housing for themselves and their families. What is a local who is not local? Detached from the land, they are faced with some unpalatable choices. They resist “Asian American” identification, because they are not really American; Hawai‘i is not America. What I mean by this statement goes beyond the illegality of Hawai‘i’s annexation and subsequent incorporation as a state. Geographically, culturally, and spiritually, Hawai‘i is very far away from the United States. If one leaves the East Coast and flies east for the same amount of time, one ends up in England. Chicana writer Cherrie Moraga told me of being taken aback on her first trip to O‘ahu to read at the University of Hawai‘i; standing and looking around her, she recognized that “this is not America” (pers comm, 1997).

Locals who are no longer local, while they are not “American” as such, are generally even less identified with being “Asian,” given the history of international tourism that has most often governed their mutual encounters. Tourist and tourist worker do not necessarily share a compelling identity. So locals who are no longer locals share a loss with Kānaka Maoli—the loss of a Hawaiian nation whose citizenry included both Kānaka Maoli and koko‘ole (those not of Hawaiian blood). Some recognize this and work for Hawaiian sovereignty in partnership with Hawaiians; others do not and in some cases even assume for themselves a Hawaiian identity (racial or cultural or both), with no acknowledgment of the differences between themselves and Kānaka Maoli.

On the continent, the shared loss of ongoing connection to the land is manifested in the marketplace, as the politics of loss and nostalgia are expressed in and pacified by consumption. The explosive popularity of “Locals Only” gear in the form of clothing, surfboards, and labels of all kinds speaks to this, as does the proliferation of aloha festivals and entertainment gatherings on the continent, where Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander music, T-shirts, bumper stickers, and local foods are bought and sold. And there is plenty of buying and selling. The 2002 Aloha Festival in San Francisco produced by the Pacific Islanders Cultural Association had hundreds of sale booths and one small tent for cultural demonstrations and political information. In years past, various hula festival and other event organizers prevented Hawaiian activists from passing out informa-

tional flyers on sovereignty issues on the grounds that this was an inappropriately “political” use of the venue. Culture gets reduced to merchandising, and this buying and selling is not recognized as political.

HOW HAVE HAWAIIANS BEEN MARKETED TO THE NON-HAWAIIAN US POPULATION?

The commodification of Hawaiian culture and identity did not originate in the diaspora, of course, but flowered with the development of the tourist economy in the islands following annexation. From the elite of Hollywood movie stars and wealthy luxury liner passengers in the 1920s and 40s to the masses of cheap-package-trip tourists after inexpensive air travel became available, Hawai‘i has been sold endlessly as a place of exotic escape from real life.

There are two points I would like to make about this. The first is to note the cultural distortions imposed by this global marketing, from the imported-from-other-islanders grass skirts of the early penny postcards of Hawaiian women, to the ways hula has been molded by hotel entertainment, to how “looking Hawaiian” becomes defined by a mixed-blood Asian/white aesthetic.

The second point closely follows the first: As a direct consequence of overexposure in the tourist market, Hawai‘i and all things Hawaiian have become kitsch. The expansion of the air travel market to middle and lower middle class consumers meant that hotels and resorts began to struggle to define themselves as upscale destinations, and—in a final irony—Hawaiian themes became firmly linked to lower-class, tacky, and definitely less lucrative business opportunities. In the 1980s, high-end hotels in Hawai‘i began to use European elegance as a selling point. One memorable evening I had dinner with my great-aunt at the former Turtle Bay Hilton on O‘ahu’s North Shore, and in the elegant polished European hardwood dining room, we were presented with a menu featuring an appetizer of blackened sashimi with wasabi beurre blanc. We laughed so much that our blond Californian waiter was mortified. On Kaua‘i I accompanied my grandparents to look at the grounds of the Princeville Hotel with its gleaming marble floors, manmade lake, floating swans, and hotel workers wearing colonial livery and pith helmets leading carriages and draft horses. As Hawaiian-ness became things to be marketed more and more cheaply, Hawaiians could be exploited in their own land without even being really visible to the wealthy traveler.

Kitsch, however, remains highly visible, from aloha shirts to tiki bars to Tin Pan Alley hapa-haole songs to Round Table's "Maui Mama" pineapple and ham pizza. This has significant political implications, because by making Hawaiian-ness seem ridiculous, kitsch functions to undermine sovereignty struggles in a very fundamental way. A culture without dignity cannot be conceived of as having sovereign rights, and the repeated marketing of kitsch Hawaiian-ness leads to non-Hawaiians' misunderstanding and degradation of Hawaiian culture and history. Bombarded by such kitsch along with images of leisure and paradise, non-Hawaiians fail to take Hawaiian sovereignty seriously and Hawaiian activism remains invisible to the mainstream; for example, Professor J Kēhaulani Kauanui's academic colleagues are unable to grasp that she actually makes exhausting work trips to Hawai'i (Kauanui, pers comm, 1999). I have had similar experiences in writing grants for Hawai'i-based projects; the implication is that we are somehow scamming free vacations. In another example, the word "aloha" has been so commodified, distorted, and exploited that its use has provoked laughter among non-Hawaiians in the context of tiki bars and campy comedy routines. Unpacking the layers of colonial accretion on a foundational cultural concept is a daunting task.

The frivolity and omnipresence of kitsch images of Hawai'i cover over a history of massive death, colonial dispossession, and attempted cultural destruction. And yet another factor that enables the kitschy transformations of Hawaiians and Hawaiian culture is that unlike other stigmatized groups in the United States, Hawaiians are not feared, even though, with our warrior history, our popular image could easily have been different. Instead, our friendliness has been a major selling point for the tourist industry for more than a century, possibly because the death toll from colonization was so one-sided.

"HAWAIIAN AT HEART"

Outside of Hawai'i, however, Hawaiian-ness has remained very much in vogue. As Hawaiian culture in the form of music and hula becomes a commodity, others buy Hawaiian-ness. On the North American continent non-Hawaiians are greatly interested in Hawaiian language, music, and so on. There is nothing wrong with this as such—and this financial and artistic support enables the survival of many musicians and entertainers—but I find it interesting that non-Hawaiians become interested in Hawaiians through the marketing of products, rather than through issues of land

rights, oceanography and navigation, farming and fishing, or other possible vectors.

Some Hawaiian-culture aficionados cross a line and begin to claim a Hawaiian identity, either as Hawaiians who mysteriously cannot locate or discuss their families, or as “Hawaiians at heart,” an ultimate appropriation, which has unfortunately been supported by too many Hawaiians concerned about others feeling left out. Unlike the famous boast of many white Americans, “My great-great-grandmother was a Cherokee princess,” Hawaiian wannabes cannot claim that their great-great-grandmothers were Hawaiian princesses—the geographical area of Hawai‘i is much too small and there is far too strong a cultural emphasis on genealogy. In Hawai‘i, if your family truly has Hawaiian ancestry, there is always someone who knows you or your family. On the continent it becomes easier for people to be vague about their family history, or—as one young woman said to me—claim that they are reincarnated Hawaiians, a concept that is culturally impossible.

Hawaiian writer and filmmaker Anne Keala Kelly’s unpublished essay “The Virtual Hawaiian vs the Actual Hawaiian: Whose Identity Is This?” explores the phenomenon of hula students “passing” as Hawaiian in Southern California, describing them as “virtual Hawaiians” (Kelly 2002). My hypothesis is that—trapped in the US binary of black and white racial recognition—Filipinas, Samoans, and other non-Hawaiians who pretend they are Hawaiian are reaching for an identity that others will recognize and legitimate, since it has been so thoroughly advertised and commodified. The Philippines and Sāmoa, for example, do not experience the “racist love” with which Hawai‘i is inundated; they are ignored or highly stigmatized by mainstream US culture. Being Hawaiian for non-Hawaiians carries no history of pain and loss.

Those who do not claim to be literally Hawaiian often make a symbolic claim. “Hawaiians at heart” assume that knowing and appreciating Hawaiian culture is enough to transform them into being Hawaiian. Indeed, some have gone so far as to claim that they are more Hawaiian than actual Hawaiians, because they have greater cultural or language knowledge. A bitter irony exists in the psychological ease with which non-Hawaiians study Hawaiian language and culture. Often Hawaiians are misread as uninterested or resistant to learning when they do not fully participate in Hawaiian education, but the reality is that all contemporary Hawaiians come from a past where our parents’, grandparents’, or great-grandparents’ use of Hawaiian language and culture was forbidden, legis-

lated against, brutally punished, or a combination of these. Non-Hawaiians without this history do not carry a legacy of internalized fear, shame, and anger to impede their study, nor do they feel guilt about this history. The anger and shame that Hawaiians cut off from their cultural history feel toward non-Hawaiians' attempted cultural one-upmanship is very real, though rarely articulated.

HUNA.COM

"Hawaiians at heart" are joined by "Hawaiians of the spirit" in the New Age spiritual industry's marketing of "huna" practices. Since the Hawaiian word *kahuna*, meaning "expert," has been irreparably kitsch-ified in the production of surfer movies, boxer shorts, and the aforementioned *Brady Bunch* episode, New Agers speak of an ancient world of "Huna" instead. American Indians and their allies have mounted a scathing critique of New Age appropriation and marketing of Indian culture and identity; Andy Smith's "For All Those Who Were Indian in a Former Life" (1991) and Lisa Aldred's "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality" (2000) remain classics of the genre. The plastic shamans of Hawaiian spirituality are peddling "Huna secrets." These Huna practitioners come in two varieties: One disavows any Hawaiian authenticity, saying that their progenitor Max Freedom Long was merely inspired by Hawaiian knowledge in the 1920s and modified it for his own purposes; the other claims knowledge of "the healing and spiritual shamanism of ancient Hawai'i." On the one hand, we have E Otha Wingo, director of Huna Research Associates in Missouri (!) admitting, "Long clearly stated that the Huna principles, which he published as a practical system for all to use, were not synonymous with the traditional religious practices of the ancient Hawaiian people" (Berney 2000, iv). On the other hand, a popular Web site (www.huna.com) claims, "In these pages you will find [Hawaiian] teachings that were once secret and carefully guarded. Today they are taught openly." These two different schools of Huna thought do not seem to notice any contradictions in their thinking, and they freely cite each other's work.

Like the American Indian-focused plastic shamans, it never seems to occur to these Huna practitioners that if their "Huna" was secret ancient Hawaiian healing, perhaps it should be directed first and foremost to Hawaiians, who have among the worst health demographics in the United States. But again, like those of the plastic shamans of the continent, these

secrets seem to be best revealed at very expensive training seminars held at resort locations for a nonindigenous clientele.

They are an eclectic bunch, however; Huna.com notes, “We also offer Training in Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Hypnosis, Time Line Therapy®, The Secret of Creating Your Future®, & Ancient Hawaiian Huna.” The problem with this, of course, is that it bears absolutely no resemblance to any Hawaiian worldview or spiritual practice. Some of these Huna practitioners, including the extremely popular Serge “Kahili” King, claim a lineage that comes from “Starmen from the Pleiades” (King 1983), which would be fine if they would just leave Hawaiians out of it.

The disrespect, exploitation, and cultural distortion and appropriation of Hawaiian culture and identity would be hard enough to deal with in the best of times—but these are not the best of times for Hawaiians. We have been under immediate attack since the 2000 US Supreme Court decision, in the *Rice v Cayetano* case, that the Hawaiian-only elections of trustees for the state’s Office of Hawaiian Affairs, which deals with Hawaiian trust issues, are a form of racial discrimination against non-Hawaiians. The ignorance of the US public about issues of sovereignty and the trust lands of the Hawaiian people, the miscategorization of indigenous issues as “racial,” and the right-wing resistance to “minority rights” have brought us to a point where Hawaiians are in great danger of losing the limited entitlements that already exist, much less the immensely greater resources and rights to which we are legally entitled and do not currently receive. We are Hawaiian at heart, history, and bone, in ancestor and child. Moke Kupihea has reminded us, “The past does not disappear, it is merely silenced” (2001, 124). As contemporary Hawaiians we are charged with filling that silence because others are too willing to fill it for us.

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Notes

1 For an extended discussion of these issues, see Kauanui 1999, 2002 (1999 is currently under review for publication). Please e-mail <jkauanui@wesleyan.edu> to secure a copy of the manuscripts.

2 Kupihea 2001 gives a clear explanation of this relationship and discusses common contemporary misunderstandings of the 'aumakua concept.

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