

What the Tour Guide Didn't Tell Me

Tourism, Colonialism, and Resistance in Hawai'i

BY WAYNE WAH KWAI AU

“SEX, HULA, AND NAKED LADIES!”

I had just asked a class of 11th-grade U.S. literature and history students in Portland, Ore., what images come to mind when I say the word “Hawai’i.” I received a volley of stereotypical responses: blue water, beaches, coconuts,

sun, surf, luau, hotels, paradise, pineapple, palm trees, vacation, Waikiki, volcanoes, and of course, “sex, hula, and naked ladies.”

This particular answer, given by an enthusiastic young man, was different than most because of its honesty about the sexual overtones



In this racist cartoon published on the eve of U.S. takeover of Hawai'i, President McKinley presides over the “shotgun wedding” of Uncle Sam and a bride representing the island nation.

C.J. Taylor, Bishop Museum

the mystique of Hawai'i holds in the "American" mind. To me, what was most significant about his remark was not just its honesty, but that it shows the need for a more critical examination of the history, politics, and culture of Hawai'i in our classrooms.

The Hawai'i most of my students know is the "paradise" construct of tourist Hawai'i, a conception that hinges on the marketing of a hypersexualized version of the islands and the indigenous Hawai'ian culture. As Native Hawai'ian sovereignty activists Haunani-Kay Trask and Mililani Trask put it: "It is our culture tourists come to see. It is our land the tourists come to pollute."

Many advocates of tourism say Native Hawai'ian culture "naturally" lends itself to the tourist industry, touting that "aloha spirit"—based on sharing and love—has welcomed tourists with open arms. In fact, tourism has nothing to do with the Native Hawai'ian concept of aloha, and what must be made clear is that tourism is not a natural outcome of Native Hawai'ian culture.

Fantasy Islands

The year 1998 marked an important centennial for Hawai'i. (I use "Hawai'i" instead of "Hawaii" because it reflects a more culturally and linguistically correct spelling and acknowledges the glottal stop common in the Hawai'ian language.) In 1898, the United States formally annexed the islands (see box, p. 5). The centennial provided a window of opportunity for teachers to explode the idealized notions of Hawai'i and its beaches, sun, and hula.

When I teach about Hawai'i, I use these fantastic images of the islands as an entry point into studying Hawai'ian politics and history. Historically, tourism has never based its marketing on reality, mainly because it seeks to

commodify real, living people, complex cultures, and environments into "sellable" products. I ask students to analyze tourist brochures. They make an ideal text because they represent the epitome of advertising—shallow, glossy, and chock-full of stereotypes. Because tourist propaganda is so holistic in its depiction of Hawai'i, its total impact culminates in the creation of a "paradise" that obscures reality.

I usually ask the students to write creative descriptions of a place called "Tourist Hawai'i," based solely on the images and information in the brochures. The key question for students is: "What kind of Hawai'i has the tourist brochure defined for you?" I encourage them to include aspects like climate, geography, culture, food, architecture, people, and attitude of the Hawai'i found in the brochures.

Students pick up on a number of trends in the brochures—for instance, that all the people are fit and trim and all the women are hourglass-shaped. The students also see a "land filled with hotels," where it is "sunny and warm 24 hours a day" and "you never have to sleep." The most telling comment was from one group of students who noticed how the Native Hawai'ians are depicted: "always smiling and friendly," and obviously there for the pleasure, entertainment, and excitement of the tourists.

After they've looked at what the tourist industry has to say, I ask students to read excerpts from Haunani-Kay Trask's book, *From a Native Daughter:*

Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i. From the reading, students get a taste of one Native Hawai'ian woman's perspective on the colonization of the islands and the subsequent effects of capitalism and tourism. Some of the realities Trask points out:

- 50 years ago, at statehood, Hawai'i residents outnumbered tourists by more than 2 to 1.

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Today, on any given day, tourists outnumber residents by 6 to 1; they outnumber Native Hawaiians by 30 to 1.

- More plants and animals from Hawai'i are now extinct or on the endangered species list than in the rest of the United States.
- Nearly one fifth of Hawai'i residents are considered "near homeless"—and just one missed paycheck will result in being unable to pay the rent or mortgage.
- Groundwater supplies on O'ahu are being used up more quickly than they can be replenished.

At the end of the excerpt I provide students, Trask makes a request: "Now that you have heard a Native view, let me just leave this thought behind. If you are thinking of visiting my homeland, please don't. We don't want or need any more tourists, and we certainly don't like them. If you want to help our cause, pass this message on to your friends."

Student Response

Haunani-Kay Trask's view alienates some students. A classroom conversation that stays in my mind centered around one young woman's reaction to Trask's request that tourists stay away. This young woman was held up by the idea that she should relinquish her individual right to go anywhere, regardless of the consequences. After all, she had already vacationed in Hawai'i, had a great time with her family, and would love to go back. Who's to tell her where she can and cannot go?

Although I did not agree with the student, I could see why she had a hard time swallowing Trask's request. Trask demands readers to challenge themselves, to think about the privileges they may have as "Americans." The annual pilgrimage to blissful paradise is something many have learned to see as the payoff for trudging to work every day. What lurks behind this reasoning is a deeper, more political, and historical argument. In the canon of American history, Hawai'i is supposed to be a U.S. property, justly acquired and owned—hands down, no questions asked. It

is our paradise to use at our leisure, and traveling there is supposed to be one of our quintessential "American," middle-class rights.

At first, I was disheartened by this type of student response. But I have come to realize that history is complex and, when it is taught critically, it will inevitably clash with some traditional American values. Learning to develop our own perspectives on the world takes time, and students need to be able to process their own interpretation of social justice for themselves.

Resistance

Eventually, with a lot more work, students can move to a deeper understanding of the islands. As a response to a mini-unit I taught on Hawai'i, one of my students, Wi-Moto, wrote the following poem:

Can we go on vacation?
Can we see the clear blue waters
And bathe in the sun rays?
Can I marvel at the green
and sip the coconut juice?
Should I play on the golf courses?
Should I swim in the pools?
Or should I turn my head
To see what's over my shoulder?
Standing there are the people of Hawaii.
The homeless, poor. The dying race,
The slowly fading culture.
Images of death and destruction,
Ghosts of the weak and suffering.
They're being pushed out;
The forgotten natives.
I don't want to vacation anymore.

While such a poem shows how the mini-unit led to an increased understanding about Hawai'i and tourism—and for Wi-Moto, a willingness to take a stand on the issue—I also felt less than satisfied when I read it. My dissatisfaction, however, was not with Wi-Moto's poem but with my curriculum. In my attempt to expose the atrocities of colonization and tourism in Hawai'i, I had not focused enough on

Native Hawaiʻian resistance and survival. This is painfully obvious in the third and fourth stanzas where Wi-Moto refers to the “dying race,” “fading culture,” and the “weak and suffering ...forgotten natives.”

Hawaiʻians are far from weak. During the last 230 years they have more than proven that they won't let themselves be forgotten. Hawaiʻians have resisted the onslaught of colonizing forces since before they killed Captain Cook in 1779 on the beaches of Hawaiʻi after he desecrated a sacred temple (see box, p. 5). In 1893, Queen Liliʻuokalani ardently protested the overthrow of her government—and 100 years later, 20,000 Native Hawaiʻians and supporters marched in downtown Honolulu to commemorate the Queen and express their outrage at her overthrow.

Today, Hawaiʻians are involved in cultural

revivals and land occupations, and have reopened demands for Native Hawaiʻian sovereignty.

In 1998, during the centennial of Hawaiʻi's occupation by the United States, a number of protests and projects were organized. One resource, *Resistance in Paradise*, was aimed specifically at educators, giving them a chance to commemorate 100 years of resistance to the U.S. occupation (see Resources).

I hope that the next time I ask a group of students what images come to mind when I say the word “Hawaiʻi,” I'll get more substantial answers than “sex, hula, and naked ladies.” ■

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Resources on Hawaiʻi

From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaiʻi (Revised ed.), by Haunani-Kay Trask. Honolulu: Latitude 20 Books (1999). An insightful collection of essays and speeches from one of Hawaiʻi's most fiery sovereignty activists and Native Hawaiʻian academics.

Hawaiʻi—Independent and Sovereign. Covers a range of issues on Native Hawaiʻian sovereignty. <http://www.Hawaii-nation.org>

Maui Nui Culture links: Hawaiʻian Rights and Sovereignty. Connects readers to a wide range of web resources about Native Hawaiʻian sovereignty. Includes links to scholarly sites, more popularly written materials, and historical documents.

<http://www.mauiculture.net/kuhikuhi/ea.html>

Na Maka O Ka Aina. An outstanding list of videos, including topics such as Environment, Teaching/Learning, Spirit of the Land, History/Independence/Sovereignty, Language, Culture, and Art/Music/Dance. <http://namaka.com/catalog/history/index.html>

Resistance in Paradise: Rethinking 100 Years of U.S. Involvement in the Caribbean and the Pacific, Asia Pacific Program of the American Friends Service Committee (1998), c/o AFSC Literature Resource Department, 1501 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102. Source materials, historical essays, lessons plans, and multiple perspectives on the U.S. annexation of Pacific and Caribbean lands seized in 1898.



This article was previously published in *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, a publication of Rethinking Schools. To order *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, visit www.rethinkingschools.org or call 800-669-4192.

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Price of Paradise

LOST IN ALL THE GLAMOUR AND GLITZ of tourist advertising is an acknowledgment that the Hawai'i we know today has come at a steep price. Before Western contact, Hawai'i maintained a complex, thriving culture, including a population estimated by some at one million people. However, by the 1840s, a little over 60 years after Captain Cook's arrival in 1778, the Hawai'ians faced near extinction from foreign diseases, and only about 100,000 Native Hawai'ians were still alive. Native Hawai'ian conversions to Calvinism flourished amid this scene of mass death and desperation, and consequently Western missionaries garnered enough influence in the Hawai'ian government to change traditional Native land tenure and economic systems to the foreigners' advantage. During this same period, and almost in conjunction with foreign impingement on Hawai'ian lands and government, U.S. President John Tyler (1841-1845) issued the Tyler Doctrine declaring to other world powers that Hawai'i was in the U.S. "sphere of influence." The foreigners' power grab then culminated in the Mahele of 1848—a division of Hawai'ian land granted by King Kamehameha III under the influence of foreign advisors. Under the division, foreigners were allowed to own land in the Hawai'ian kingdom, resulting in the massive dispossession of Native Hawai'ians from their traditional lands. By 1888, three quarters of all arable land was under non-Hawai'ian control.

In 1893, a group of foreign businessmen—led by U.S. Minister to Hawai'i John L. Stevens and supported by the Marines of the *USS Boston*—sparked a military coup and illegally overthrew the sovereign Native Hawai'ian government. Sanford B. Dole, a descendant of missionaries, was selected president of the newly established provisional government. A little over a year later, the independent Republic of Hawai'i was proclaimed. A Native rebellion ensued in 1895, and subsequently the leader of the Hawai'ian Kingdom, Queen Lili'uokalani, was imprisoned by Dole's provisional government. Finally, in 1898, the United States government officially annexed the Hawai'ian islands. This effectively took away—for the meantime, at least—the Native Hawai'ians' right to self-determination.

Resistance in Paradise: 1898-1998

The United States annexed Hawai'i during a time of imperialist expansion. During the same year, following its victory in the Spanish-American War, it made other key acquisitions in the Pacific and the Caribbean and took control of the Philippines, Guam, Samoa, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. In all of these places, the American military played a prominent role—both in the immediate sense of direct military support and coercion, and in the sense of fulfilling long-term goals of establishing naval stations in strategic positions throughout the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

As part of the occupations, the indigenous peoples of these areas were dispossessed of huge amounts of land. In Hawai'i alone, it has been estimated that 95 percent of all state-controlled lands were ceded to the United States by the illegally established government of Sanford Dole, including nearly 30 percent of O'ahu, which now belongs to the U.S. military.

During the 1998 centennial, a number of protests and projects were organized to mark these events. Among the projects, at least one was aimed at educators: The Asia Pacific Program of the American Friends Service Committee assembled a resource guide entitled *Resistance in Paradise: Rethinking 100 Years of U.S. Involvement in the Caribbean and the Pacific*. This guide, co-written and edited by educators and community activists, is made up of source materials, historical essays, lesson plans, and perspectives on the U.S. annexation and control of Pacific and Caribbean islands. Among other topics, the guide examines indigenous resistance and sovereignty, the fight against U.S. militarization of indigenous lands, and the environmental and cultural impact of U.S. imperialism.