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Rohrer/Haoles in Hawai'i

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INTRODUCTION

It's 1974. I'm seven. My hippie father has just moved our family from California to Kaua'i, one of the most rural of the Hawaiian Islands. I'm standing in the long lunch line outside the cafeteria at Kōloa Elementary school. I'm petrified—the school is huge, there are all sorts of rules, and the kids speak some form of English I can't understand. I've retreated into my head, allowing a gap to form in the line in front of me. The boy behind me gives me a push and says with complete disdain, "Fucking haole!" I have no idea what this means, but I know it can't be good.

My introduction to haole came as a rude awakening, as it does for many. Growing up in California, I had some ideas about race. There were African American, Jewish, and Chicana/o children in the “free school” that my parents ran, and I ruled. If asked about race, I probably would have identified these children and their families and vocalized an antiracist sentiment learned from my parents, that is, “We should treat everyone the same regardless of skin color.” It is unlikely that I would have racialized myself since, in my mind, race was not about me.

This all changed in that lunch line at Kōloa. I was suddenly a very distinct racial minority without any comprehension of what it meant. The kids around me pointed it out in some very direct, but also indirect, ways (there were whispers, glances, social exclusion). I was used to being liked, used to having many friends, so I was devastated and desperate to find some way to understand it all. I remember going home to talk to my mother about it. She said I should tell classmates I was Swedish, Swiss-German, Mexican, and Greek.

Emboldened with a renewed sense of self I made this declaration the

very next day on the playground, only to get the response, “So? You still one haole!” Clearly that was not going to work. I learned that “haole” was originally a native Hawaiian word meaning “foreign” that has come to mean white people and “acting white” or acting haole in the islands. Eventually I figured out how to diminish my haole quotient by trying not to call attention to myself and learning the ways of local culture. But the problem of being or becoming haole has never gone away. It has been one I have consciously returned to and often been forced to confront since Kōloa Elementary.

I begin with this story because I think the moment at which white people who move to Hawai‘i are first racially marked as haole is pivotal. Confronted with the unfamiliar label “haole,” we respond from what we know, and that is usually our experience of race on the continent (I refer to the continental United States as “the continent”).¹ And so we are surprised because in Hawai‘i we are made aware of our whiteness, whereas on the continent, for the most part, we were oblivious to it or took it for granted. Unlike the continent, whiteness in Hawai‘i is always marked and often challenged. I do not mean to suggest that race on the continent is all one thing or that the “white experience” there is homogenous. There are, however, some common threads.

The most glaring thing about being white on the continent is its *non*experience. White Americans, for the most part, think we do not experience race; we think it is something that happens to other people, something that is not “our issue.” We think race is primarily about Black people because that is what has been ingrained in us by our culture. We see ourselves as the nonraced norm because that is the message we constantly receive from the media, government, schools, corporations, and so forth. We do not see how we benefit from white privilege every day; we do not recognize our “possessive investment in whiteness” (Lipsitz 2006). As one scholar put it, “Racial privilege is the (non)experience of not being slapped in the face” (Frankenberg 1996, 4). This is changing somewhat in recent years as white people become more white-race cognizant, unfortunately often as they adopt ideas of white victimization espoused by anti-immigrant and anti-affirmative action rhetorics (Gallagher 1997). Still, overall, it is fair to say that white people on the continent tend not to think, or be challenged, about their whiteness.

As continental white people, we also have internalized the idea that it is not nice to talk about race, at least not publicly, and especially not in racially mixed company. It is commonly believed that talking about

race or noticing race is a sign of racism—and above almost all else, we want to avoid being called racist. That does not mean we do not talk about race (especially when in the company of other white people), but we know that the polite thing to do is to be “colorblind,” to ignore race (regardless of what we actually think about it). By not talking about it, we are also able to continue to pretend race—and therefore racism—do not exist.

And then we get to Hawai‘i, where we are suddenly in the racial minority, which is uncomfortable or at least unusual for most of us, and all around us people are using racial terms and talking about race. Additionally, these people are not Black, the racialized “other” we are most familiar with, or rather think we are. They are Asian and Pacific Islanders, cultures we have come to think of as exotic, mysterious, or sinister. Hawai‘i is one of only four “states” without a white majority, although haoles now make up over 40 percent of the population (California, New Mexico, and, most recently, Texas are the other three).² Native Hawaiians (Kanaka Maoli) make up approximately 20 percent of the population. In this book I use several terms for the indigenous people of Hawai‘i: Kanaka Maoli, native Hawaiian, and Hawaiian. Kanaka Maoli is preferred politically because it comes from the Hawaiian language and carries ties to other indigenous Pacific people—“Maoli’ is cognate with ‘Māori’ of Aotearoa and ‘Mā’ohi’ of Tahiti” (Silva 2004, 13).³ Kanaka Maoli trace their genealogies back to the time before Captain James Cook arrived in 1778. The balance of Hawai‘i residents constitute the “local” (about 36.5 percent), excluding the 3.5 percent of the population who are military personnel (and hard to ignore are the seven to eight million tourists who visit each year but are not part of the census numbers).⁴ When I talk about “locals” I do not mean residents. In Hawai‘i, local identity and culture emerged primarily from the experience of laborers on sugar and pineapple plantations and is primarily a mix of Portuguese, Asian, native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Island cultures. There are many intralocal politics and differences that are important to think about and trace; however, this book deals mostly with the three overarching constructs of haole, native Hawaiian, and local. For newly arrived haoles, it is easy to feel like “strangers in a strange land,” since in many ways that is what we are.

And yet a narrow focus on numbers reduces the complexity of haole, naturalizing it and obscuring the ways haole is a socially produced racial construction rooted in the colonization of Hawai‘i. Sometimes “haole” is

used as a descriptive marker, a way to identify us, especially for a local person who does not know us. For example, “Eh haole, you saw one set of keys ova hea?” Often, however, especially when we are new to the islands, we are called “haole” because we have acted out our haoleness, violating local cultural norms. This happens by being arrogant, rude, oblivious, greedy, talking too loud or too much, or taking up too much space. For example, consider this remark: “Eh haole, you can get off da phone an’ move your cart from da middle of da aisle? Get odda folks like shop, you know!”

In the second example, it is obvious the speaker is upset. We quickly presume that their use of the word “haole” is meant negatively. But the first instance is more difficult to decipher because the speaker did not seem angry. Still, given the general white (non)experience with race, many haoles in this instance assume they have been slandered with a “dirty name.” And then we start complaining about being called “haole,” just like I did to my classmates at Kōloa Elementary. I further explore this question of whether or not “haole” is a derogatory word in chapter 3.

What I am trying to establish here is that when many white Americans come to Hawai‘i, they interpret the meaning of haole through a continental lens: white is not raced but the norm; race is Black; and talking about race is impolite at best, racist at worst. This tendency to overlay a continental race relations framework on the islands is possible because, for the most part, Hawai‘i is considered unproblematically part of the United States. Americans know very little about Hawai‘i’s history outside of the bombing of Pearl Harbor (although maybe this will change a little with native son Barack Obama in the White House). Instead, Hawai‘i conjures up iconic images of white sand beaches, “hula girls,” and umbrella drinks—images meant to seduce visitors into an ahistorical, apolitical bubble of a tropical paradise where they are eternally welcomed and comfortable.⁵

This book, then, is my latest effort to make some sense of haole and enter a more public discussion about the politics of haole. In the islands, people are used to identifying someone they do not know as “haole,” but at the same time we also know it is much more complicated than that. Being haole is more than just having pale skin. We may have a niece who looks haole but acts completely local and has mixed ancestry. We know a local guy at work who is always being teased for acting haole. We have a local haole friend who grew up in Kekaha, Kauai, and speaks

pidgin better than many urban locals. Haole reminds us that race is not phenotype or even genes (although it is often constructed that way). It can be as much about culture and behavior or performance as about skin color.

These examples demonstrate that race is a sociopolitical system used to classify people. Since race is a classification system we made up, and not something “natural” or given, it has history. In Hawai‘i, it was forged in the fires of American colonialism that dispossessed Kanaka Maoli (native Hawaiians, those who were inhabiting the islands when Captain Cook arrived in 1778) and pitted different immigrant groups working on the plantations against one another. Given this history, it should not be surprising that race operates differently in the islands than it does on the continent, or anywhere else, for that matter. Race is very closely tied to place.

As with many racial-ethnic categories, it is impossible to neatly pin down what haole is. That is because it is many things all at once and these things change depending on time, space, and social context. By this I mean, for example, that haole is not the same thing now that it was during the time of the Hawaiian Kingdom; haole is not the same as honky or gringo, although they are related; and haole at Kamehameha Schools (established to benefit native Hawaiians) means something different than haole at Punahou School (established by missionary families and still predominantly haole). Haole is not something that just is, it is something that is an ongoing production; it is made and continually remade. It is best thought of as a verb rather than a noun. Therefore, I believe it is useful to think about how haole is produced, to look at the processes that operate that give haole meaning and power, and how they change. I have tried to structure this book to do that.

I draw from a variety of different sources in my investigation of haole: public controversy and debate (especially as chronicled in local media); cross-disciplinary academic scholarship; legal cases and discourse; and my own experience. By investigating these sources I hope to give a broad overview of the historic and contemporary constructions of haole. Part of the reason I cast such a wide net is that, to date, there has been very little scholarship about haole.

The sole existing book on the subject until now was written by Elvi Whittaker, a Canadian anthropologist, titled *The Mainland Haole: The White Experience in Hawaii* (1986). Whittaker visited Hawai‘i in the early 1980s and interviewed over one hundred people, producing an

insightful analysis of haole. Not having grown up in Hawai‘i or having the experience of long-time residency, however, she misses some of the specificity of racial and indigenous politics in the islands. Her book was also written prior to much of the current Hawai‘i scholarship I am able to draw upon. Inspired by Whittaker and other white feminists questioning their own whiteness, in 1997 I published an article on haole, drawing largely on my own personal experience (Rohrer 1997). There have been a few other pieces since then, but not many (Glenn 2002, Kraemer 2000, Ohnuma 2002, Pierce 2004).

This dearth of scholarship is contrasted with a good deal of “on the ground” discussion about, and knowledge of, haole. As already established, race is not the taboo subject in Hawai‘i that it is in the dominant white culture of the continent. In fact, race gets talked about constantly in Hawai‘i. It is now an everyday part of island culture, a tool people use to navigate a very multiracial environment. Yet, racial categorization is not indigenous to Hawai‘i, but stems from a history of colonialism that dispossessed native Hawaiians, brought in a variety of mainly Asian and Pacific Islanders for plantation labor, and used race as a way to maintain power.

When I was writing my article in 1997 I was puzzled by how much scholarship there is about other racialized groups in the islands, but not haole. I now understand this as largely related to colonialism. Part of the way colonial power operates is by turning those who are not part of the colonizing group into “others”—those who are seen as different and inferior. In Hawai‘i, this meant that haole (singular) became the standard, the norm against which others were measured. Academics, who are still mostly white even in Hawai‘i, tend not to study themselves, but rather that which they deem to be abnormal, different, or a problem. By doing so, they can participate in that othering process. Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith instructs, “Problematizing the indigenous is a Western obsession” (Smith 1999, 91).

It follows that, until relatively recently, scholarship on Hawai‘i has been dominated by non-Hawaiians (mostly haoles) studying “exotic” Hawai‘i and its inhabitants. Native Hawaiians were characterized as savage, noble, lazy, unintelligent, generous, and exotic. Following a similar trajectory to representations of Native Americans, Kanaka Maoli were (and still are) represented as a tragic “dying breed”—a fascinating object for study by haoles, who for the most part were blind to their responsibility for Hawaiian dispossession and death. Additionally,

Asian immigrants were orientalized as a “yellow peril,” un-American, and inassimilable. Unfortunately, there is still a lot of scholarship that explicitly or implicitly promotes these ideas.

Part of the goal of this book is to change that frame. Instead of continuing to cast an academic analytic gaze on “the other,” I want to participate in moving the lens of interrogation to the haole. I study how haole colonization dispossessed Kanaka Maoli of power, land, and identity and how they resisted. I explore the complex relationships between haole, native Hawaiian, and local racial constructions. I look at the ongoing debate about the use of the term “haole” and the recent legal maneuvering to position haole as a victim.

Those who are familiar with postcolonial studies and critical whiteness studies will see the influences of these fields in this book. Postcolonial studies provides insight into thinking about the complex intersecting processes that constitute colonization, the relationships between people in colonies, and the many forms of resistance.⁶ It has tended to focus on European imperialism, leaving U.S. imperialism undertheorized. Critical whiteness studies encourages us to think about whiteness as a form of racialization produced largely through the racialization of “others.” It insists that without a better understanding of whiteness we cannot move toward racial justice.⁷ As a field it has tended to focus on Black-white relations, given little attention to colonization, and encouraged an abstracted, essentialized notion of whiteness. I utilize the theoretical tools offered by both areas of scholarship, while at the same time trying to address some of their weaknesses.

This book is certainly not meant to be the definitive word on haole (there is something truly ironic about being identified as the “haole expert”). Rather, I hope it will add to conversations in the islands about how we think about haole, colonization, race relations, and struggles for Hawaiian sovereignty. At the end of the day I will be happy if I am able to raise questions regarding common assumptions about haole’s place in Hawai‘i and, further, Hawai‘i’s place in the United States.

Roadmap

In chapter 1, “‘Haole Go Home’: Isn’t Hawai‘i Part of the U.S.?”, I contextualize haole historically and politically as a colonial, and now neocolonial, form of American whiteness. I argue that it is impossible to understand haole without understanding something about Hawai‘i’s

history of colonization. It is not my intent to give a full accounting of the colonization of Hawai'i (I point to some of the excellent literature in this area), but rather to give an overview of the colonial processes that brought haoles into nearly complete power during the century after the arrival of Captain Cook. These include the imposition of Western science, religion, law and politics, capitalism, and language and communication.

By mining some new Hawai'i scholarship, this chapter seeks to uproot some of the most pernicious misrepresentations of the colonization of the islands. It contests the ideas that Hawai'i's history began with Cook's landing, that colonization was easy and nonviolent, and, perhaps most importantly, that Kanaka Maoli did not resist. In this way it challenges notions of the haole as discoverer, savior, and civilizing force in the islands.

In chapter 2, "No Ack!': What Is Haole, Anyway?", I explore the way haole is produced in relation to other racialized groups in Hawai'i; specifically, I look at the triangulation of haole, native Hawaiian, and local identities. I demonstrate how colonial racialization of native Hawaiians and nonwhite immigrants (locals) served to provide negative referents for haole. I discuss how many haoles today seek to be "anything but haole" (through denial, appropriation, and application of a color-blind ideology), but how local culture and politics simultaneously work to reinforce Hawaiian and local constructions of haole.

Further, I address how Hawaiian and local constructions of haole are based not just on an understanding of colonial history, but also on a particular set of attitudes and behaviors distinctly out of synch with native Hawaiian and local values and social norms. These include arrogance, ignorance about Hawai'i's history and cultures, greed (e.g., amassing wealth and taking up physical and social space), and the assumption of a stance of victimization in response to racial marking. While these attitudes and actions are often seen in haole newcomers, they are not limited to them.

Chapter 3, "Eh, Haole': Is 'Haole' a Derogatory Word?", suggests that debating whether "haole" is a "dirty word"—a regular occurrence in the local media—is not particularly helpful. Instead, this chapter reframes the question to "What motivates people toward the continued use of 'haole' and what meanings does it mobilize?" Despite repetitive attempts to banish it, "haole" is still a popular word in local parlance precisely because people find it useful. It has not been replaced by the

social-scientific term “Caucasian” as some would like because it carries particular meanings and histories rooted in Hawai‘i.

Chapter 3 discusses two dominant discourses of race in Hawai‘i, the well-known racial harmony, or “melting pot,” narrative and a discourse of racial conflict and discrimination against nonlocals. While in some ways contradictory, in other ways these discourses reinforce one another in that they both naturalize haole’s presence in Hawai‘i. In the first, haole belongs to the racial stew of the islands as much as any other racialized group—it is “one of the tribe,” to quote a haole playwright (Mark Pinkosh quoted in Viotti 1995). In the second, haole should be treated as any other group in Hawai‘i but is unjustly discriminated against. Both discourses dehistoricize haole in that they pretend that over two hundred years of colonization do not exist, enabling haoles to position themselves as victims.

Chapter 4, “‘Locals Only’ and ‘Got Koko?’: Is Haole Victimized?”, looks more closely at attempts in the last decade to recast haole as a victim. I argue that it is a mistake to equate entitlements, programs, or preferences for native Hawaiians with haole victimization. From the haole oligarchy that overthrew the Kingdom of Hawai‘i and ruled the islands until the 1950s (when the “democratic revolution” put many Japanese locals into power),⁸ to current statistics on the in-migration of haoles versus the out-migration of Hawaiians, to socioeconomic indicators, the pattern is one of variable but persistent haole political and economic power.

The spate of recent lawsuits, starting with the 2000 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Rice v. Cayetano*, provides insight into how this power is now being reconsolidated through the overlay of dehistoricized color-blind ideology that whitewashes (pun intended) Hawai‘i’s history and makes Hawaiian claims for entitlements appear unreasonable. I demonstrate how these lawsuits misrepresent native Hawaiians as a racial group seeking “special rights” or “race-based” advantages rather than an indigenous people recognized in federal and state law. My hope is that by looking at haole through all these various lenses—historical, relational, performative, discursive, and material—a greater understanding of haole will emerge. This understanding will not reduce haole to simply the colonizer or a contemporary victim, but will look at the complex historical constructions, contestations, and discourses that have given haole meaning and power. Having a better understanding of haole is important for all who live in and/or care about these islands. We

cannot effectively address the ongoing processes of colonization, including militarism, tourism, and legal attacks on native Hawaiians, without it. For those of us who recognize ourselves as haole, it is important that we have this knowledge so we can begin to imagine how we might become haole in different, and hopefully better, ways. We have to know where we have been to know where we are going.

A Note about Language

Throughout the book I use Hawaiian terms. They are not italicized as they are not foreign to Hawai'i. They are defined at first use and I provide a glossary at the back. The spellings and definitions I use are based on Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert's *Hawaiian Dictionary* (Pukui and Elbert 1986).