

Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism and the Politics of Sovereignty and Indigeneity

J. Kehaulani Kauanui

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In *Hawaiian Blood*, J. Kehaulani Kauanui teases out the vexed relationship between racism, colonialism and the political history of the Kanaka Maoli, otherwise known as native Hawaiians. In so doing, she demonstrates how the application of the fiction of “blood quantum” has been used to render the Kanaka Maoli both too native and insufficiently native to reclaim their self-determination, their territories, and the political incidents of those matters. Kauanui addresses the specific history and politics of the Kanaka Maoli, but her methodology and analysis lend themselves to some fresh thinking about how the notion of “blood quantum” has been used elsewhere, including in Canada. Thus, the material is not merely of interest to those concerned with Hawaiian history, but to those who study the historic dispossession, oppression and liberation struggles of indigenous peoples in all the settler states.

She writes that “the ‘inauthentic’ status of Natives is a condition for sovereign dispossession in the service of settler colonialism” (25), a process which evolved through a relationship marked by successive treaties between the Hawaiian kingdom and the US; the consolidation of political and economic power by a *haole* elite; and, ultimately, the overthrow of the kingdom in 1893 and the instalment of a provisional government, which created the Republic of Hawaii on July 4, 1894 (27–28). Hawaii, listed in 1946 as one of the UN’s non-self-governing territories, “was eligible for decolonization under international law” (29). However, when Hawaiians (a majority of whom were settlers and military personnel) voted to become a state in 1959, the ballot question provided only two choices: “incorporation or remaining a US colonial territory” (29). Reanimating the monarchy was not an option on the ballot; and the vote was rigged against consideration of Hawaiian sovereignty by virtue of “equal” voter eligibility.

Kauanui begins by recounting a personal experience, an incident at a family gathering where she was accosted by a shirttail relative by marriage. “He came right up to me and pointed his finger three inches from my nose while he demanded I tell him ‘how much Hawaiian blood’ I have ... treating me as *haole* (white person or foreigner) and denying my connection to ‘our’ family” (1). As she explains the event and its significance within the cultural framework of her community, the reader begins to understand the multiple levels on which racialization of identity works, with degrees of dysfunction that split families and communities and leads to personal and collective injury. Who belongs? Who decides? For what purposes?

The imposed discursive and legal framework about identity and authenticity enforced blood quantum classification that framed native Hawaiians as “a racial minority rather than an indigenous people with national sovereignty claims” (10). Rejecting blood quantum, Kauanui argues that the cultural kinship and genealogies of her community connect people with the land. Thus, culture and connection to community are the basis of identity and belonging, and also of rights and claims to sovereignty against the historical and continuing colonial occupation by the US.

For the Kanaka Maoli, genealogy frames status and identity; they encode understandings of time, history and culture. Rank is gendered. There are profound differences, both conceptually and in consequence, between blood quantum and indigenous genealogy. Genealogies connect people to each other and to the land, while “blood quantum is a classificatory scheme (relative to) a forebear who is supposedly racially unmixed” (41–42). It is kinship that animates Hawaiian identity, and kinship confers relationship, duty and status. Kinship maintains the ties that frame culture coher-

ence and continuance: kinship confers identity and identity situates belonging. The cultural significance of identity was not the simplistic racist formula of blood quantum.

But not only indigenous Hawaiians are affected by racist legal and social discourse. Kauanui explores the way in which racism has functioned to create a hierarchy, so that native Hawaiians have been seen as assimilable, while Asians were seen as so different and so deficient as to be unassimilable. This produced a “racial triangulation” (142) of white, Asian and native that framed racist legislation, culture and discourse. The difficulties for those with both Kanaka Maoli and Asian ancestry are apparent. People were identified, and were forced to identify, in ways that did not take into account who they were.

And American government bureaucrats and politicians used evidence of “racial ‘comingling’ to undermine who could count as native Hawaiian” (19), applying a “logic of dilution” (32). This has created a potent brew of racism, framing contemporary members of the entire Hawaiian community differently depending on what they look like and who their ancestors were. “Blood,” it seems, overdetermines social and political relationships historically and today.

Following the appropriation of Hawaii by the US and the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy, many Kanaka Maoli were forced off their lands and into urban slums. The *Hawaiian Homes Commission Act* of 1920 (HHCA) was purported to be a means to allow destitute primarily urban Hawaiians to return to the land. It required 50 per cent “blood quantum”—a fundamentally racist conception—for eligibility for the land to homestead, thus disenfranchising many, perhaps most, Kanaka Maoli, and forcing people to prove their “blood.” All of this occurred in conditions while the traditional territories of the Kanaka Maoli were under the American flag, occupied and exploited by primarily non-indigenous corporations for agriculture and for tourism.

Kauanui traces the historical background for the HHCA, which became a struggle over Hawaiian history and land holding; and the politics and political economy of colonial dispossession, appropriation and colonial American administration. Intended to be a homesteading movement to reunite indigenous Hawaiians with land, the bill was motivated by concerns that *pure* indigenous Hawaiians, disenfranchised and impoverished, were in danger of dying out. The land was to be re-acquired from sugar plantations. The economy of Hawaii was dominated by the Big Five, a set of powerful corporations who monopolized the sugar trade and whose profits depended “on continued access to vast acres of dirt-cheap public-lease lands” (69). The politics of the land rehabilitation movement split the Kanaka Maoli into those who had class privilege and those who did not; between those who favoured privatization and those who did not.

Tension between the Hawaiian rehabilitation and rights movement and the *haole* sugar elite led to a complex politics stretching from the islands to the American Congress. Ultimately the HHCA functioned to entrench dispossession of Kanaka Maoli lands, and it did so through the racist framework for citizenship, culture and identity, and law.

Kauanui documents how blood quantum has operated to create categories of Kanaka Maoli who are simultaneously too native to be treated as claimants of land, sovereignty and other political rights, while being insufficiently native enough to claim land and sovereignty. She concludes her account with the assertion that Kanaka Maoli identity is grounded in sovereignty, self-determination and citizenship, which is precisely why American political and corporate interests seek to contain it.

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