

GOV. WAIHE'E: THE UNTOLD HAWAIIAN HISTORY 🌺 NĀ WĀHINE O KE KAI: CHAMPIONS OF THE CHANNEL

SEPT/OCT. 2013

# MANA

THE HAWAIIAN MAGAZINE

*He Hawai'i Au*  
**OUR IDENTITY, OUR FUTURE**



SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2013

\$4.99





# HAWAIIAN

Forming And  
Transforming  
Hawaiian Identities

# ENOUGH

BY KE'OPŪLAULANI REELITZ • PHOTOGRAPHY BY OLIVIER KONING



**GROWING UP** in a part-Hawaiian family, it wasn't uncommon to feel I had somehow gotten the short end of the genetic stick, distinguished from my oldest brother by light skin, hazel eyes and 'ehu hair. I developed emotional armor to deflect classmates adding an expletive before haole when teasing me. I tried as hard as I could to smile when someone told me I couldn't possibly be Hawaiian. But indifference only gets you so far. By the time I was 16, I faced the most difficult challenge to my identity as a kanaka maoli.

I was a sophomore at Kamehameha Schools Kapālama when I faced nearly weekly exchanges with friends and strangers who asked me "are you really Hawaiian?" A rumor had circulated that I had gotten into the school as a non-Hawaiian through a conspiracy theory-like number of loopholes. Not only did I have to defend my own identity, but for the first time I felt the experiences of my two part-Hawaiian parents were threatened. I became quickly adept at explaining my genealogy from both my mother and my father's kūpuna – and talented at doing it without showing an ounce of the 'eha that filled me.

You can imagine how confusing it must have been then to enter graduate school on the Continent and have classmates refer to me not by my given name, but simply by my ethnicity – "the Hawaiian," they would call me. What was I? Haole or Hawaiian? Could the two ever coexist? Would I ever be Hawaiian enough?

These questions have followed me for most of my life as a part-Hawaiian who looked somewhere between the 20th century tourist depictions of Hawaiians and the Committee of Safety. They followed me as they follow so many other kanaka maoli whether on the Continent or here in the Islands.

To understand how a kanaka 'ōiwi comes to call himself or herself Hawaiian, we found that we needed to refer to our kūpuna, to our interactions with the world outside of Hawai'i, to the

advances we've made in the past 50 years and to conversations we're still having today. Because, as San Jose State University professor and self-proclaimed diasporic Hawaiian, Rona Halualani, writes: "Identities are legacies in the making."


### *Where do identities begin?*

Sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists have spent more than 50 years evaluating how individuals assume, present and assert their identities. Ethnic studies offered an additional voice to the discussion as we struggled to express how our racial experiences affected the way we see and express ourselves.

What much of the academic world has managed to provide us is a framework to decipher how exactly our identities are formed. The work of psychologists and sociologists has acknowledged that identity goes beyond what we see in the mirror – there is an added layer of social interaction. Halualani writes that "identity stands as a larger social arena, in which specific meanings of who we are connect to and combine with" a number of external factors, including practices, power interests, and history.

Aside from complex equations of interactions between what we see on the inside and what others see from the outside, scholars have struggled to integrate how our race affects our identity. But to include that additional racial





component, academics focused on experiences in a highly racialized United States.

Dr. Brandon Ledward, a maoli cultural anthropologist, notes, "America, in a very general sense, is highly racially divided ... The one drop rule makes you black or white." It is through this lens scholars have sought to understand how race affects one's identity. What Ledward and other scholars call the "mono-classification of race" suggests we can only ever see ourselves as one race or another. And that either-or approach affects how we see ourselves. It also affects how others see us and categorize us – as black, white or some form of brown. In short, it affects our identity.

But how does that approach really measure up in our Island home, where mixed race is the norm? How did that foreign approach arrive on our shores in the first place?

### *"Hawaiian" in history*

Although concepts of race existed in the Hawaiian Kingdom, an individual's identity was often linked to political loyalties and ancestry. Ledward believes from his research that "what mattered most to Hawaiians in the time of our monarchy was whether you were kanaka Hawai'i. Not necessarily 'ōiwi or kanaka maoli or hapa haole, but whether or not you pledged your political life to the kingdom, whether you were a kingdom subject and worked for the betterment of this place, this 'āina."

Many scholars trace the racialization of Hawaiians to the late 1800s and early 1900s. The time period is known best for the overthrow of the monarchy. However, other key developments during that time directly shaped our racial experience here in the Islands.

The late 1800s and early 1900s marked a rise in American influence and interest in the Islands. The shift from independent nation to territory of the U.S. in turn changed the way Americans viewed Hawai'i and Hawaiians. Americans' new way of seeing Hawaiians is best exemplified by representations at international exhibitions and in the tourism industry during this time.

During Kalākaua's reign, Hawai'i participated as an independent nation-state displaying the dominant agriculture exports alongside culturally significant items like kapa, lei, nets and other implements. In contrast to a depiction of a living culture, the 1901 Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, N.Y., presented the world with "hula hula" dancers performing in the Hawaiian Village next to the display of wild animals and other items collected during the U.S.'s extension into the Pacific with the Spanish-American War. In combination with these representations was a

government-backed tourism industry that seemed to sexualize and silence Hawaiians in order to bring visitors to a booming Waikiki (which was developed in partnership with the "Big 5" that also controlled the agricultural industry in the Islands at the time).

The shift in the depictions of Hawaiians imposed a new view, one that tried to neutralize the native and make us seem a little more palatable than oppressed races on the continental U.S. such as American Indians and black Americans. This new view was formalized in 1921 with the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act.

In 1920, Prince Kūhiō introduced the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act (HHCA) to the U.S. Congress. The bill proposed to set aside more than 200,000 acres of lands that were once controlled by the crown as settlement for the Hawaiian people. Blood quantum quickly became a focus of Congressional hearings. The original version of the bill allotted land to individuals that were no less than 1/32 Hawaiian. In the end, Prince Kūhiō succeeded in convincing Congress to pass the Hawaiian Homelands Commission Act but failed to maintain a lower threshold for the blood quantum requirement. Native Hawaiian by law now meant at least one-half Hawaiian.

Many mark the HHCA as a turning point in bringing Hawaiians into the American racial fold. It was the first time that a Hawaiian identity was established by law, and it was an identity that was defined in terms of a percentage of blood. Ledward considers this not just a turning point, but a legacy that still presents challenges to Hawaiians. "This inherited notion of a racial identity that we get is from an American colonial history. It's marked right there in our Hawaiian Homes Commission Act, this kind of blood edict about who is and who is not Hawaiian."

The story of Hawaiian identity thankfully follows closely a broader narrative of Hawaiians' resurgence. By the 1960s, Hawaiians had at least one voice to speak to our identity. John Dominis Holt, a hapa-haole writer, wrote a seminal essay. That essay, "On Being Hawaiian," and Holt himself helped spur what we now know as the Hawaiian Renaissance.


Holt broke ground in a couple of ways. "I think he – I mean this was pre what we call Hawaiian renaissance – is writing about trying to reclaim a space just to call yourself Hawaiian," says Ledward. In addition to opening the discussion on what it means to be a Hawaiian, Holt, who owned both his haole and Hawaiian ancestries, expanded the conversation to include what it meant to be mixed race Hawaiian. Holt represented a reawakening of a Hawaiian identity that paralleled a cultural, political, and social revival of Hawaiians in general.



*"What mattered most to Hawaiians in the time of our monarchy was whether you were kanaka Hawai'i. Not necessarily 'Ōiwi or kanaka maoli or hapa haole, but whether or not you pledged your political life to the kingdom, whether you were a kingdom subject and worked for the betterment of this place, this 'Āina."*







Holt's breakthrough work alongside that of his contemporaries' political and cultural advances paved the way for Hawaiians not just to see ourselves in a different light, but also gave the world a new view of what it meant to be Hawaiian. By 2001, Hawai'iunuiakea professor and historian Jon Osorio wasn't just making a space for us to talk about being Hawaiian. He was asking us difficult questions about our identity, like "What Kine Hawaiian Are You?" an essay published in the *Contemporary Pacific*.

We have come a long way since the early days of expositions and the HHCA when it comes to understanding and discussing our identity. But that journey hasn't been without growing pains. Today, k̄naka maoli continue to struggle with questions – questions like the one Osorio asked, "What kine Hawaiian are you?" or ones like those I faced, "Can I be Hawaiian enough?" While we thankfully survived a period where Hawai'ianness was outlawed, it seems we're not in the clear yet.

### *What is Hawaiian Today?*

Amber Makaiau is an educator who has encouraged students at Kailua High School to take a leading role in both asking and answering those questions for themselves.

Makaiau is no stranger to these questions. Her family has roots in the Islands from long before the overthrow. But because of her haole ancestry, she has faced her fair share of prejudices. She has come to call herself a kama'āina to honor her family's long legacy in the Islands and the only place she and her family have known and loved as home for well over 100 years.

Makaiau and Kehau Glassco, both social studies teachers at Kailua High School, designed and implemented a culturally relevant ethnic studies course in 2004. The high school partnered with the Asian Pacific Islander Youth Violence Prevention Center, which targeted the school as a place with strong Native Hawaiian representation.

In its very basic intentions, the class is meant to reduce violence. However, it became an experience that transformed both Makaiau and her students even more than the objective; they tackled difficult questions of identity, assumptions, prejudice and racism in Hawai'i while building relationships. One of the most telling transformation was the identity narratives students were required to research and write, and which Makaiau analyzed to provide insights into these students' identities.

The identity narratives of the Hawaiian students give keen insights into how our newest generation of k̄naka maoli continue to form and transform their identities. In her dissertation, Makaiau analyzed the narratives and found that "having a Hawaiian identity is more complex than the stereotypes that have romanticized this group throughout U.S. history. Hawaiian identity is about being deeply connected to place, a larger group of people who are living and passed on, a collective history and a vision for the future."

Many of the students tell stories of expressing their identities through language, music, food, sports and other traditional practices, telling of the strong legacy of the Hawaiian Renaissance, when exploration of identity first began. But students dove even deeper into the questions they had about their identities and how they stood up to their own and others' definitions of what it means to be Hawaiian.


"You may have the Hawaiian blood, but if you do not know the history or practices and traditions, you will never know who you are as a Hawaiian," wrote one student. Other students wrote similarly about their pride in traditions and practices – dancing hula, playing music or cooking with family. The sense of pride in those people and things in our history that came before and a responsibility to a greater community were strong sources of Hawaiian identity in many of the narratives.

But pride was not the only way these students expressed their Hawaiian identity. One student described her private elementary school where she often felt like she was treated differently because she was Hawaiian. Many other students described their Hawaiian identity in direct contrast to haole. "Being Hawaiian, I feel like haoles have taken over Hawai'i. It seems to me they show no respect for our land. ... I feel that haoles don't have the same respect for our land as we do," wrote one student.

One unfortunate byproduct of this expression of identity was that some students felt swept up in the haole versus Hawaiian dichotomy. "Born Hawaiian, but raised in the Mainland. When I walk down the streets of Kailua I look like a tourist to all the 'locals,' but if they knew the real me they would see a man who bleeds blue like the Pacific Ocean he loves ... When you call me 'haole' or 'white boy' I will smile and walk away... [to them] I am an outsider, but this is my home, and my roots are buried in the dirt of the island," wrote one student.

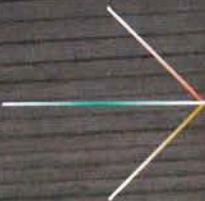
Ledward spent much of his doctoral research on the experiences of Hawaiians like the student who bled blue. "It just troubled me because it seemed like we had inherited a lot of these, what I call, internal measuring sticks. What it means to be a Hawaiian easily



A young girl with long brown hair, wearing a white t-shirt and denim shorts, stands barefoot on a stone ledge next to a small pond. She is looking towards the camera. The background is a dense garden with large green leaves and trees. The water in the pond reflects the surrounding greenery.

*Today, kānaka maoli continue to struggle with questions – questions like the one Osorio asked, “What kind Hawaiian are you?” or ones like those I faced, “Can I be Hawaiian enough?”*





*"What we're really trying to do is create this safe environment where we're asking questions and we're being self-reflective and the whole point is to be thinking about yourself, thinking about your relationships."*





becomes racialized, with certain kinds of phenotypes, a certain kind of skin color, a certain kind of hair." Ledward wanted to know where these measuring sticks came from. "I traced them back to the anthropological and touristic depictions of Hawai'i that kind of endure," he says.

Both Ledward's and Makaiau's research seemed to show that the identity of our community as a whole is formed similarly to the way individuals find their own identities: an interaction between what we see within and what others see from the outside. Inaccurate and trivialized depictions of Hawaiians, both historical and contemporary, still play a part in how Hawaiians see ourselves – and, as a result, form our identity as a community.

Additionally, the way we see and treat each other inside the community affects us. "It became more acceptable to have a Hawaiian identity and to look and act Hawaiian. I think that actually put a strain on some of our community that have those attributes that sometimes resemble, at least at first glance to be, what is believed to be the opposite of what we're doing," says Ledward. And so it seems the questions of identity are still left open even after all these decades of searching for answers.

## *A safe space for the future*

Ledward's and Makaiau's work seems to suggest that the questions themselves are the answers to help Hawaiians build strong positive identities. "In the end what I think I found is that there are a lot of similarities in experiences that we have as a community endured. We don't often talk about them until you're finally in that closed safe environment," says Ledward.

Safe spaces were key to get students to examine themselves and each other in Makaiau's ethnic studies class. "It's creating an environment where people are more receptive to hearing it. In day-to-day interactions, people might not be ready to hear things. So what we're really trying to do is create this safe environment where we're asking questions and we're being self-reflective and the whole point is to be thinking about yourself, thinking about your relationships," says Makaiau.

Students in the ethnic studies class establish what Makaiau calls a "community of inquiry." Makaiau describes the space as a place where students are "able to listen and have empathy and the tools for thinking deeply about these issues so that you can question your assumptions." Makaiau continues, "If you have these assumptions, is there evidence? Is this true? Is

there evidence to support that it's true? Or maybe there are some counter-examples and being open to changing your thinking about it."

But what kind of identity will these safe spaces bring us?

Ledward hopes ultimately we'll be more "comfortable in our Hawaiian skin." Ledward asks himself, "Can we ever be comfortable? I think it has to be that balance of comfortable in ourselves, embracing our diversity, and seeing that as a strength." He continues later, "What's not okay is when we feel we can't share that experience, if for some reason someone feels like that lessens their standing or commitment to the cause, if we can't talk about it."

It give us more than the space Holt once opened for us to talk about being Hawaiian. It gives us even more agency that scholars like Holt, Osorio and so many others fought for over the past 50 years. "At the very least, I think we as Hawaiians should be making the rules on or the ideas of what Hawaiians are. And as a mixed ethnicity we should have discussions about it," says Ledward.

Ledward acknowledges the work of predecessors like Holt and Osorio in opening the space and asking difficult questions about our political and cultural identities. He hopes the discussion continues to ask even more difficult questions about how we see each other. "We can't be any less vigilant on how we treat each other. Are we policing our own borders of Hawaiianness too stringently?"

If identities are legacies, as Halualani suggests, then what are the legacies we will leave our next generation? Will it be a new version of Hawaiian or still more questions?

Many of us, including Makaiau and Ledward, who are each raising part-Hawaiian children of their own, hope to resolve these questions so the next generation won't have to ask themselves if they're Hawaiian enough. We must admit that our hopes rely not on the next generation but rather on us as adults being able to talk about these issues today. We can take comfort in Makaiau's observation: "These are things that people think about on a day-to-day basis all the time. People really do want to connect with one another and talk about it."

As you read this article another fair-skinned, light-eyed, young part-Hawaiian just like me is trying not to flinch as someone asks her if she's really Hawaiian. By the time she becomes an adult, maybe we will have succeeded in creating those safe spaces that Makaiau and Ledward discuss. By that time, hopefully she will feel comfortable in her Hawaiian skin. And eventually she will live and breathe Hawaiian ... and that will be enough. ▲