Literature in Hawaii: Who Gets to Write It?

by Jennifer Lui

Many people have different ideas of what should constitute “Hawaiian Literature” and because of these various ideas the definition has become blurred. The idea of Hawaiian Literature or even Local Literature is something that it seems everyone has a different idea about. So what makes literature Hawaiian or Local? Where is that line drawn? Can someone from the mainland, who has lived in Hawai‘i for a significant amount of time, be considered a Local writer? What about a person who isn’t a native Hawaiian? Can they be considered a Hawaiian writer? After reading a great deal on the subject, I’ve had to come to my own conclusion about what should be considered Local or Hawaiian literature. Although Haunani Kay Trask and other authors like her may disagree with me, I believe that Local and/or Hawaiian literature is anything that reflects the diverse culture of Hawai‘i. You don’t need to be able to trace your genealogy back to indigenous Hawaiians or even have been born here to be considered “Hawaiian” or even “Local.” Hawai‘i is not only native Hawaiians anymore, we have an extremely diverse culture and the literature coming from Hawai‘i should reflect that.

Defining who is a Hawaiian and who isn’t is something that has been debated for a long time. I was born in Hawai‘i but am not Hawaiian ethnically. Does that mean my writing cannot be considered “Hawaiian”? Writers like Haunani Kay Trask believe so. According to Trask, “Hawaiian literature is that which is composed by Hawaiians” (Trask 168). By her definition, to be considered Hawaiian you must be part of the indigenous people of the Hawaiian Islands. Don’t get me wrong, I can completely understand why she feels like she needs to protect the definition of “Hawaiian”, and many non-natives don’t consider themselves “Hawaiian” necessarily, but there is a fine line between wanting to keep your ethnicity’s identity and discriminating against other ethnicities. I don’t walk around saying that I’m Hawaiian, but I do believe that my writing should be considered “Hawaiian Literature” because it reflects the Hawaiian culture as it is today.

To say that Hawaiian literature should be only written by native Hawaiians limits the amount of literature that is contributed. My ethnic background is Japanese and Chinese. So what culture or geography would my writing represent? I’ve never been to either of those countries, but would my writing be “Japanese literature” or “Chinese literature”? That makes no sense. There are so many people in Hawai‘i and around the world, whose background is comprised of more than one ethnicity. But how can our literature represent countries that we have never visited or that we have never immersed ourselves in the culture of? Hawai‘i is my home, not Japan nor China. The culture of Hawai‘i is the one I’m representing. It is the culture I know. If I’m not considered as contributing to Hawaiian literature, then what literature am I contributing to? According to Haunani-Kay Trask, “residence in Hawai‘i does not make one Hawaiian, anymore than residence in Samoa or Tahiti or China or Japan makes one Samoan or Tahitian or Chinese or Japanese” (168). While I agree that ethnicity-wise, a resident of Hawai‘i is not Hawaiian, I do not agree that the person can completely not call themselves Hawaiian. When you look at Hawai‘i as a state and not a specific ethnicity, just by living here we’re automatically categorized as “Hawaiian” and should be included in Hawaiian literature. There are many different ways to look at it.

What about “Local” literature? “Local” being different than “Hawaiian” because to in my mind it would mean more of the area that you’re from or that you live in rather than the culture all together. To me, there isn’t much of a difference between contributing to Local literature or Hawaiian literature. It all comes down to the culture and lifestyle that you’re representing in your writing. Being local should be a state of mind, not determined by your ethnicity. A person shouldn’t be told they’re not local just because they weren’t born in Hawai‘i. A person from the mainland who has embraced the island culture and lifestyle can be just as ‘local’ as someone who has lived here all of their life, sometimes maybe even more so. I think the term “local” could be used to describe almost anyone who understands that there are things that make Hawai‘i special, things that cannot be found or experienced anywhere else in the world. While it does seem that “local” is sometimes a term too casually used, it doesn’t lose any of its importance. There is always going to be debate on what is local and what isn’t. But I’m sure this is the
same everywhere, not only in Hawai‘i.

When it comes down to it, in my mind, both local and Hawaiian literatures are represented in the same way. To represent them, there needs to be a level of understanding of the Hawaiian culture and history. This is a different idea from many of those that have come up in the readings about ethnicity that I have read. I don’t think it should matter what your ethnicity is. You have no control over that. As a writer, as a person, you do have control over the aspects of culture and life that you represent.

So where does literature like “Asian American” literature fit into Hawaiian literature? Does it fit into Hawaiian literature? Sure it does! And it fits in right where it should, right next to the literature by native Hawaiians. In many of the early anthologies of Hawaiian literature, Asian writers were not represented at all. Stephen Sumida, while talking about James Michener in his essay “Waiting for the Big Fish,” said “in this supposed paradise, hard-working Asians did not write, did not cultivate verbal expression while they cultivated Hawai‘i’s soil, much less indulge in verbal creativity. There were utterly no Asian voices to drown” (Sumida 303). That was the notion when anthologies such as A. Grove Day and Carl Stroven’s A Hawaiian Reader were released. Michener, in his Introduction in A Hawaiian Reader, said “having arrived in the islands as laboring peasants, these Orientals did not produce a literature of their own, but Professors Day and Stroven have included important passages that give them representation” (Michener xiv). Of course, all of the passages he spoke of were not written by Asians (or “Orientals” as he calls them) but by Caucasian writers. To me, this implies that they feel that Caucasians can represent Asians better than the Asians can represent themselves. As the years have gone on, Asian American writers have taken a larger place in local literature. Part of me wonders if native Hawaiians resent this, and that is why they feel like they need to protect the definition of “Hawaiian” literature. Haunani-Kay Trask, in her essay “Decolonizing Hawaiian Literature” says:

Asian writers who grew up in Hawai‘i and claim their work as representative of Hawaiian literature or of our islands are the most obvious example (of writers who claim that they are Hawaiian). By asserting a special island identity, these local Asian authors hope to separate themselves from Asian writers elsewhere in the American imperium. Their claim to difference is precisely that they are local, that is, they are “from” Hawai‘i. (Trask 169)

Trask goes on to say that this is a falsification of place and culture. Perhaps there is a definite line between who should and should not be included in Hawaiian literature, but the fact that Asian writers are getting the type of attention that the native Hawaiian authors would like is possibly causing the friction between the two ethnic groups.

One representation of “Hawai‘i” I don’t agree with is the case of someone claiming to be contributing to either “Hawaiian” or “Local” literature and they have never lived in the islands. There’s a huge difference between a person who is only a visitor and a person who lives here. The listing of writings in A Hawaiian Reader is a good example of how writings that I feel should not be considered Hawaiian literature are sometimes included in a Hawaiian anthology. How can writers like Jack London understand what the culture is like in Hawai‘i and consider themselves and their work part of Hawaiian literature? I don’t feel that you can understand the culture of Hawai‘i without living here and immersing yourself in it. A visit will not give you the exposure you need to be able to embrace the culture.

When you take into consideration all the various cultures and ethnicities that are part of Hawaiian culture, how can you not consider them all to be part of “Hawai‘i”? To me, it doesn’t seem fair that we’ve grown up in Hawai‘i, embraced the diverse culture, and contributed to the culture of the islands, but our writing is not considered to be part of “Hawaiian” literature. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but the exclusionary one some people espouse can only go so far and still be considered reasonable. Just because a person isn’t “Hawaiian” ethnically doesn’t mean that their writing cannot be considered a representation of Hawaii. There should be no ethnic division between what is and isn’t considered “Hawaiian” or “Local” literature. Asian writers have just as much a place in Hawaiian literature as native Hawaiians. There is something special about writers that are able to contribute to Hawaiian and Local literature and there is something special about their writing. We are all very fortunate to be able to contribute to a growing “genre” of literature and to help define what can be considered part of it.
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