English 315 Research Argument Essay

Hawaiian Cultural Rejuvenation

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Growing up in the concrete jungle of San Francisco, I always dreamt of living in Hawai‘i. Since Elvis Presley made his tributes honoring this tropical paradise, many Americans such as I, yearned to feel, taste, and explore the wonders of this fantasy island. When I decided to move to Hawai‘i, I envisioned myself leaving my cares behind, packing all my hopes and expectations for this lovely destination, boarding a plane to paradise, and stepping off the plane onto a sandy beach. Once land-bound, I would be necklaced with a ring of flowers. For dinner, I would grab a seat at Hawai‘i’s endless tables decorated in an inviting manner: apple-corked roasted pork, mai tais served with tiny umbrellas in coconut shells, and chopped pineapples, bananas, and mangoes. The ambiance of this extravagant luau would include lovely hula dancers swaying to the lyrics of Don Ho who is singing about a grass hut and the humuhumunukunukuapua‘a (Hawai‘i’s state fish). After hours of gorging on tropical flavors and entertained by the happy locals, a brisk walk through the coconut trees and sugar cane fields would soothe my full stomach. That is what came to my mind, as a mainlander, when I planned this fateful move. Shortly after arriving in the Big Island, the stark difference between my romantic impressions and the brutal reality of Hawai‘i was evident in the seemingly hostile attitude of the locals. Through the popular venues of Hollywood movies and tourism, Hawai‘i is reduced to a happy vacation spot budding with attractions such as hula dancing and luaus. This is a terrible distortion because this manufactured dream only presents one dimension of Hawai‘i’s rich culture and causes more harm than help for Hawai‘i. As explained by Jay Hartwell in Na Mamo: Hawaiian People Today, published in 1996, “in modern Hawai‘i, few visitors or residents think about what the Hawaiians have lost and why so many of them are so angry. Nor do they understand the pride of many Hawaiian people—pride in the roots of their culture, which goes deeper than the orchid lei tossed around a vacationer’s neck” (Hartwell, ix). It should be noted that Jay Hartwell is a non-Hawaiian who left his job as a reporter for Honolulu’s morning newspaper to share a collection of profiles by Hawaiian people in order to educate readers that Hawaiian people are holding on to their culture and to show readers how the native Hawaiian culture is being perpetuated (Hartwell, 1996). The “Hawaiian Renaissance,” which blossomed in the early 1970s, voiced a definite announcement that the vitality of the Hawaiian people was still thriving. The “Hawaiian Renaissance” is mistakenly perceived as a cultural resurgence of a slumbering culture. Nevertheless, visitors should not make the same mistake I did, and discard their stereotypes of Fantasy Island, and recognize that Hawai‘i has a flourishing culture and people. The “Hawaiian Renaissance” only marks a chapter in an on-going legacy for Hawaiians.

Many mainlanders are misinformed about the history of Hawai‘i’s statehood. Similar to the Thanksgiving myth, history books depict happy Hawaiians readily sharing their land and eagerly playing host to their superior American protector. But the actual history of Hawai‘i’s statehood tells a more chilling tale. According to the Collection of Papers on Hawaiian Sovereignty and Self-Determination, published by the Institute for the Advancement of Hawaiian Affairs in 1992, by the end of the 1800s, the United States robbed Hawai‘i of being a free and unoccupied nation (Laenui, 1992). Thereafter, Hawai‘i faced dramatic changes, which affected all aspects of life. The publishers coined this period “The Recycling of Hawai‘i 1900 to 1959” (Laenui, 1992). It should be noted that this booklet was written by Poka Laenui (also known as Hayden F. Burgess) who is a licensed attorney. Since the 1970s, Laenui has represented himself as well as others before the U.S. Courts as citizens of Hawai‘i. In fact, the United Nations recognizes Laenui as “an expert in the field of indigenous peoples” (Laenui, 1992). Laenui explains that the U.S. implemented “a massive brainwashing program” to train the Hawaiians into believing that the American government was their “legitimate ruler” and to discard their Hawaiian identity and take on their new American identity (Laenui, 1992).

The first step of this brainwashing program was redefining the word “Hawaiian”; instead of a national term, it became a racial term (Laenui, 1992) This degrading shift illustrates how America minimized the Hawaiian identity from a national
perspective to a restricted ethnic group. This calculated move was supposed to teach the Hawaiians that they lost their heritage as a nation. This lesson also nudged Hawaiians to embrace their imposed identity as an ethnic group living on American soil. The next step was forcing Hawaiian children to attend the American schools, and while there speak only the foreign (English) language and adopt the foreign (American) lifestyle. In addition, official government proceedings were carried out only in English (Laenui, 1992). By instituting a monopoly on language, America attempted to brainwash Hawaiians into adopting the American identity. Laenui goes on to describe that “every aspect of Hawai’i was Americanized…Hawai’i, that melting pot of cultures, races, languages, and lore changed from a reality to an advertisement slogan for politicians and merchants” (Laenui, 1992). Understandably, American suppression of the proud Hawaiian identity fuel so much of the Hawaiian people’s anger.

The turbulent 1960s provided Hawai’i a great opportunity to witness the strength of the black struggle and American Indian Movement in the United States. Subsequently, Hawai’i developed a changed attitude toward the American government. The paternalistic disguise which the American government worked so hard to foster had been shattered. The U.S. was exposed to be the invasive and unwelcomed presence on Hawaiian soil. “Many in Hawai’i came out of the 1960s with greater sensitivity for racial identity and pride in the cultural heritage of Hawai’i” (Laenui, 15). This shift created a path for Hawaiians to educate the world: their legacy did not end with statehood.

The 1970s ushered in the Hawaiian cultural rejuvenation. After movies and tourism distorted the Hawaiian culture into a one-trick pony, there developed a need for the Hawaiians to reclaim their culture and instill their authenticity back into the word “Hawaiian.” According to the article “Kuleana: The Right, Responsibility, and Authority of Indigenous Peoples to Speak and Make Decisions for Themselves in Language and Cultural Revitalization” by Sam L. No’eau Warner, the author reports that the Hawaiian Language Immersion Program, known as the Kula Kaiapuni, revitalized interest among the native Hawaiians in promoting their own indigenous heritage, language, and culture (Warner, 1999). It should be mentioned that Sam L. No’eau Warner is an assistant professor of Hawaiian Language at the University of Hawai’i at Manoa (Warner, 1999). After decades of Americanized schools, Hawaiians seized this opportunity to create schools which promoted their own interests. This was a monumental achievement because the Hawaiian Language Immersion Program renewed the Hawaiian identity and nurtured their language in the youth. Hawaiians speaking their native language improved their confidence because it strengthened their identity and enabled them to express themselves in words that their ancestors spoke. Hawaiians continue to speak English, but they are able to do so with the assurance of knowing that it is not their only language available. Warner emphasizes that there is power when an indigenous group, in this case the Hawaiians, speak for themselves because they can address their own concerns. When another group speaks on their behalf, there is a harmful potential that the issue might be misrepresented.

Another way Hawaiians have revived to authentically express themselves is through their hula. Similar to the strength of their people, the love of their hula proved to be resilient. After decades of tourist industries using hula to lure customers, there was a hearkening to reclaim hula by the Hawaiian people. During the Hawaiian cultural rejuvenation of the 1970s, the Hawaiians successfully created their halau, which taught the hula in its proper form. This education spread and made its way into the hearts of many who respect hula. According to the article “Globalizing Hula” by Amy Ku’uleiaholoa Stillman, since the 1970s, the Hawaiian hula has spread to international reach. Nevertheless, the hula tradition
remains Hawai‘i-centered. One of the oldest and most prestigious events for hula located in Hawai‘i is the Merrie Monarch Hula Festival. This was established in 1971, and it is held in Hilo on the Hawai‘i Island every year. Stillman goes on to quote Keahi Allen, who organizes the King Kamehameha Hula Competition; “I look at it this way: Hula lives around the world, and if we’ve got other people from other countries who respect it, and want to learn it, and they’re hungry for it; it’ll just make it [hula] live more” (Stillman, 1999).

The Hawaiians succeeded in taking back their language and dance, but another important dimension to their people is nationhood status. This has yet to be settled. Some persons of Hawaiian ancestry seek secession of statehood from the American union. According to the 1997-published article, “Hawaiian Sovereignty” by Anne Feder Lee and Norman Meller, since the Hawaiian cultural rejuvenation of the 1970s the movement for national Hawaiian sovereignty grew popular. In other words, supporters want to discontinue being one of the states in the United States: instead they want to be recognized as the Hawaiian nation (Lee, 1997). It should be noted that both authors for this article come from Hawai‘i. Norman Meller writes articles for University of Hawai‘i at Manoa, and Anne Feder Lee is a writer from Honolulu, Hawai‘i. These authors further assert that some native Hawaiians refuse to acknowledge the annexation of Hawai‘i because they claim its U.S. statehood occurred without Hawai‘i’s independent consent. (Lee, 1997) The Hawaiian Sovereignty movement is divided into three categories. The first group is the “Hawaiian Nation Separatists” who support an independent Hawaiian nation. The second group is the “Nation-within-a-Nation;” these advocates desire a status comparable to that of the Native American Indians. The last group is composed of the Hawaiians who support the status quo and they require redress of Hawaiian needs (Lee, 1997). It is clear that the Hawaiians, for the most part, seek a course of action concerning their land, but the direction to take has yet to be determined.

In 1978, the Hawai‘i state legislature adopted amendments to the state constitution which created the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA) and the election of trustees to OHA’s governing board (Lee, 1997). OHA was initially created to serve the interests of native Hawaiians, and thus level the deficiencies that they suffered. In effect, OHA was intended to be a “unique, semiautonomous fourth branch” attached to the Hawaiian state government, eventually playing a dominant role in the sovereignty movement (Lee, 1997). According to the Office of Hawaiian Affairs’ website, this “branch” is composed of nine trustees elected statewide. OHA functions operationally as “both a government agency with a strong degree of autonomy, and as a trust” (OHA, 2007). Nevertheless critics worry that OHA’s power might be used against the Native Hawaiians. Because OHA is an “official state agency” it can evolve, by way of a federal charter, into the governing structure of the Hawaiian nation. This is a devastating possibility because OHA might very well become an extension of the U.S. government and not the protector of the Hawaiian people as intended when OHA was created (Lee, 1997).

The Hawaiian cultural rejuvenation of the 1970s, better known as the “Hawaiian Renaissance”, was a political assertion by the Hawaiian people. Hawai‘i endured decades of colonialism, Americanization, and misrepresentations by tourist advertisements. Hawai‘i, not only endured this oppression, but this culture fought back by rejuvenating their sense of identity. Before outsiders visit Hawai‘i, they must discard their romanticized impressions, and take on the realization that they are approaching a dynamic culture whose spirit is not defeated. Hawai‘i shares a torrid past with America. What might be perceived as hostility from the locals towards the mainlanders or outsiders is actually a deep-rooted pain. Not only has their land been snatched away from them, but the reminder of America’s looming power is brought in with American tourists and lack of respect for Hawai‘i’s struggle. I came to this island, innocently hoping to live in paradise. While it is a beautiful place filled with lovely people, it is by no means a fantasy island. In comparison to the shallow tourist image of Hawai‘i, the actual characteristics encompassed by the Hawaiian culture prove far richer.
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