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cultural contexts for critical thinking and writing

rethinking america

second edition
Exploring Connections

5. Limerick writes in paragraph 3 that “the pursuit of improved fortunes, the acquisition of property, even the desire for adventure seemed so self-evident that they needed neither explanation nor justification.” Use information from Christopher Lasch’s “Changing Modes of Making It” (p. 27) to help explain why westward expansion in the nineteenth century seemed obviously inevitable and proper.

Extending the Critical Context

6. All things considered, would it have been better to enforce General Wool’s proposed moratorium on development in Oregon throughout the past century and a half?

7. Reread Limerick’s discussion of the ways white settlers cast themselves as innocent victims of nature (paras. 7-10). Can you think of examples in your state in which people have “set themselves up” to become victims of earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, droughts, or other forces of nature? Under what circumstances do you think government should help people who have suffered financially at the hands of an unpredictable natural world?

8. Analyze a high school history text in terms of its treatment of conflicts between Native Americans and whites. Does the theme of “injured innocents” show up directly or indirectly? How might you account for any differences you find in these sources?

9. The award-winning film Dances with Wolves has been proclaimed as a turning point in the representation of the conflict between American Indians and settlers. However, it could be argued that the film has had such broad appeal because it promises mainstream audiences that they, like the hero, can recapture lost innocence. Watch the film, taking note of its portrayal of American Indians and settlers, and discuss its impact on the audience.

From a Native Daughter

HAUNANI-KAY TRASK

Speaking of nineteenth-century Americans and birth control, a scholar recently said, “They didn’t know much, and what they did know was wrong.” The same could be said of the historians of Hawaii. This selection comes from a scholar who is literally rewriting the history of Hawaii. Trask explains how she learned radically different versions of history from her family and from missionary schools; having trusted her formal education for years, she eventually recognized that the colonists had distorted Hawaiian history in order to disrupt the islands’ culture and appropriate their resources. This essay is an impassioned yet carefully reasoned assault on conventional interpretations of Hawaii’s past and peoples. Trask, a professor of Hawaiian Studies and the director of the Center for Hawaiian Studies at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa, has published Eros and Power: The Promise of Feminist Theory (1986) and continues to pursue academic work on the political and cultural struggles of native islanders.

E nei wale mai no ka haole, a, 'a'ole e pau na hana a Hawai'i 'imi loa
Let the haole freely research us in detail
But the doings of deep delving Hawai'i
will not be exhausted.
— KEPÈLNÔ, 19th-century Hawaiian historian

Aloha kākou. Let us greet each other in friendship and love. My given name is Haunaniokawêkium o Haleakalâ, native of Hawai'i Nei. My father’s family is from the 'āina (land) of Kauai, my mother’s family from the 'āina of Maui. I reside today among my native people in the community of Waimânalo.

I have lived all my life under the power of America. My native country, Hawai‘i, is owned by the United States. I attended missionary schools, both Catholic and Protestant, in my youth, and I was sent away to the American mainland to receive a “higher” education at the University of Wisconsin. Now I teach the history and culture of my people at the University of Hawai‘i.

When I was young the story of my people was told twice: once by my parents, then again by my school teachers. From my 'ohana (family), I learned about the life of the old ones: how they fished and planted by the moon; shared all the fruits of their labors, especially their children; danced in great numbers for long hours; and honored the unity of their world in intricate genealogical chants. My mother said Hawaiians had sailed over thousands of miles to make their home in these sacred islands. And they had flourished, until the coming of the haole (whites).

At school, I learned that the “pagan Hawaiians” did not read or write, were lustful cannibals, traded in slaves, and could not sing. Captain Cook had “discovered” Hawai‘i and the ungrateful Hawaiians had killed him. In revenge, the Christian god had cursed the Hawaiians with disease and death.
I learned the first of these stories from speaking with my mother and father. I learned the second from books. By the time I left for college, the books had won out over my parents, especially since I spent four long years in a missionary boarding school for Hawaiian children.

When I went away I understood the world as a place and a feeling divided in two: one *haole* (white), and the other *kānaka* (native). When I returned ten years later with a Ph.D., the division was sharper, the lack of connection more painful. There was the world that we lived in — my ancestors, my family, and my people — and then there was the world historians described. This world, they had written, was the truth. A primitive group, Hawaiians had been ruled by bloodthirsty priests and despotic kings who owned all the land and kept our people in feudal subjugation. The chiefs were cruel, the people poor.

But this was not the story my mother told me. No one had owned the land before the *haole* came; everyone could fish and plant, except during sacred periods. And the chiefs were good and loved their people.

Was my mother confused? What did our *kāpuna* (elders) say? They replied: did these historians (all *haole*) know the language? Did they understand the chants? How long had they lived among our people? Whose stories had they heard?

None of the historians had ever learned our mother tongue. They had all been content to read what Europeans and Americans had written. But why did scholars, presumably well-trained and thoughtful, neglect our language? Not merely a passageway to knowledge, language is a form of knowing by itself; a people's way of thinking and feeling is revealed through its music.

I sensed the answer without needing to answer. From years of living in a divided world, I knew the historian's judgment: *There is no value in things Hawaiian; all value comes from things haole.*

Historians, I realized, were very like missionaries. They were a part of the colonizing horde. One group colonized the spirit; the other, the mind. Frantz Fanon had been right, but not just about Africans. He had been right about the bondage of my own people: "By a kind of perverted logic, [colonialism] turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it" (1968:210). The first step in the colonizing process, Fanon had written, was the deculturation of a people. What better way to take our culture than to remake our image? A rich historical past became small and ignorant in the hands of Westerners. And we suffered a damaged sense of people and culture because of this distortion.

Burdened by a linear, progressive conception of history and by an assumption that Euro-American culture flourishes at the upper end of that progression, Westerners have told the history of Hawai'i as an inevitable if occasionally bitter-sweet triumph of Western ways over "primitive" Hawaiian ways. A few authors — the most sympathetic — have recorded with deep-felt sorrow the passing of our people. But in the end, we are repeatedly told, such an eclipse was for the best.

Obviously it was best for Westerners, not for our dying multitudes. This is why the historian's mission has been to justify our passing by celebrating Western dominance. Fanon would have called this missionizing, intellectual colonization. And it is clearest in the historian's insistence that pre-*haole* Hawaiian land tenure was "feudal" — a term that is now applied, without question, in every monograph, in every schoolbook, and in every tour guide description of my people's history.

From the earliest days of Western contact my people told their guests that *no one* owned the land. The land — like the air and the sea — was for all to use and share as their birthright. Our chiefs were *stewards* of the land; they could not own or privately possess the land any more than they could sell it.

But the *haole* insisted on characterizing our chiefs as feudal landlords and our people as serfs. Thus, a European term which described a European practice founded on the European concept of private property — feudalism — was imposed upon a people halfway around the world from Europe and vastly different from her in every conceivable way. More than betraying an ignorance of Hawaiian culture and history, however, this misrepresentation was malevolent in design.

By inventing feudalism in ancient Hawai'i, Western scholars quickly transformed a spiritually-based, self-sufficient economic system of land use and occupancy into an oppressive, medieval European practice of divine right ownership, with the common people tied like serfs to the land. By claiming that a Pacific people lived under a European system — that the Hawaiians lived under feudalism — Westerners could then degrade a successful system of shared land use with a pejorative and inaccurate Western term. Land tenure changes instituted by Americans and in line with current Western notions of private property were then made to appear beneficial to the Hawaiians. But in practice, such changes benefited the *haole*, who alienated the people from the land, taking it for themselves.

The prelude to this land alienation was the great dying of the people. Barely half a century after contact with the West our people had declined in number by eighty percent. Disease and death were rampant. The sandalwood forests had been stripped bare for international commerce between England and China. The missionaries had insinuated themselves everywhere. And a debt-ridden Hawaiian king (there had been no king before Western contact) succumbed to enormous

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1 *Frantz Fanon*: French West Indian psychiatrist, author, and political leader. Fanon (1925–1961) is perhaps best known for his psychoanalytic study of Black life in a white-dominated world, *Black Skin, White Masks*. His *The Wretched of the Earth* called for an anticolonial revolution by peasants; he anticipated that such a struggle would produce a new breed of modern people of color.
pressure from the Americans and followed their schemes for dividing up the land.

This is how private property land tenure entered Hawai'i. The common people, driven from their birthright, received less than one percent of the land. They starved while huge haole-owned sugar plantations thrived.

And what had the historians said? They had said that the Americans "liberated" the Hawaiians from an oppressive "feudal" system. By inventing a false feudal past, the historians justify — and become complicit in — massive American theft.

Is there "evidence" — as historians call it — for traditional Hawaiian concepts of land use? The evidence is in the sayings of my people and in the words they wrote more than a century ago, much of which has been translated. However, historians have chosen to ignore any references here to shared land use. But there is incontrovertible evidence in the very structure of the Hawaiian language. If the historians had bothered to learn our language (as any American historian of France would learn French) they would have discovered that we show possession in two ways: through the use of an "a" possessive, which reveals acquired status, and through the use of an "o" possessive, which denotes inherent status. My body (ko 'u kino) and my parents (ko'u mākaua), for example, take the "o" form; most material objects, such as food (ko'u mea'i) take the "a" form. But land, like one's body and one's parents, takes the "o" possessive (ko'u 'aina). Thus, in our way of speaking, land is inherent to the people; it is like our bodies and our parents. The people cannot exist without the land, and the land cannot exist without the people.

Every major historian of Hawai'i has been mistaken about Hawaiian land tenure. The chiefs did not own the land: they could not own the land. My mother was right and the haole historians were wrong. If they had studied our language they would have known that no one owned the land. But was their failing merely ignorance, or simple ethnocentric bias?

No, I did not believe them to be so benign. As I read on, a pattern emerged in their writing. Our ways were inferior to those of the West, to those of the historians' own culture. We were "less developed," or "immature," or "authoritarian." In some tellings we were much worse. Thus, Gavan Daws (1968), the most famed modern historian of Hawai'i, had continued a tradition established earlier by missionaries Hiram Bingham (1848) and Sheldon Dibble (1909), by referring to the old ones as "thieves" and "savages" who regularly practiced infanticide and who, in contrast to "civilized" whites, preferred "lewd dancing" to work. Ralph Kuykendall (1938), long considered the most thorough if also the most boring of historians of Hawai'i, sustained another fiction — that my ancestors owned slaves, the outcast Kauwā. This opinion, as well as the description of Hawaiian land tenure as feudal, had been supported by respected sociologist Andrew Lind (1938). Finally, nearly all historians had refused to accept our genealogical dating of over one hundred generations in Hawai'i. They had, instead, claimed that our earliest appearance in Hawai'i could only be traced to A.D. 700. Thus at least seven hundred years of our history were repudiated by "superior" Western scholarship. Only recently have archeological data confirmed what Hawaiians had said these many centuries (Tuggle 1979).

Suddenly the entire sweep of our written history was clear to me. I was reading the West's view of itself through the degradation of my own past. When historians wrote that the king owned the land and the common people were bound to it, they were saying that ownership was the only way human beings in their world could relate to the land, and in that relationship, some one person had to control both the land and the interaction between humans.

And when they said that our chiefs were despotic, they were telling of their own society, where hierarchy always results in domination. Thus any authority or elder is automatically suspected of tyranny.

And when they wrote that Hawaiians were lazy, they meant that work must be continuous and ever a burden.

And when they wrote that we were promiscuous, they meant that love-making in the Christian West is a sin.

2See also Fornander (1878–85). Lest one think these sources antiquated, it should be noted that there exist only a handful of modern scholarly works on the history of Hawai'i. The most respected are those by Kuykendall (1938) and Daws (1968), and a social history of the twentieth century by Lawrence Fuchs (1961). Of these, only Kuykendall and Daws claim any knowledge of pre-haole history, while concentrating on the nineteenth century. However, countless popular works have relied on these two studies which, in turn, are themselves based on primary sources written in English by extremely biased, anti-Hawaiian Westerners such as explorers, traders, missionaries (e.g., Bingham [1848] and Dibble [1909]), and sugar planters. Indeed, a favorite technique of Daws's — whose Shoot of Time is the most acclaimed and recent general history — is the lengthy quotation without comment of the most racist remarks by missionaries and planters. Thus, at one point, half a page is consumed with a "white man's burden" quotation from an 1880 Planter's Monthly article ("It is better for the colored man of India and Australia that the white man rules, and it is better here that the white man should rule . . . . etc., p. 213). Daws's only comment is "The conclusion was inescapable." To get a sense of such characteristic contempt for Hawaiians, one has but to read the first few pages, where Daws refers several times to the Hawaiians as "savages" and "thieves" and where he approvingly has Captain Cook thinking, "It was a sensible primitive who bowed before a superior civilization" (p. 2). See also — among examples too numerous to cite — his gib description of sacred hula as a "frivolous diversion," which, instead of work, the Hawaiians "would practice energetically in the hot sun for days on end . . . their bare brown flesh glistening with sweat" (pp. 65–66). Daws, who repeatedly displays an affection for descriptions of Hawaiian skin color, taught Hawaiian history for some years at the University of Hawai'i; he now holds the Chair of Pacific History at the Australian National University's Institute of Advanced Studies. [Author's note]
And when they wrote that we were racist because we preferred our own ways to theirs, they meant that their culture needed to dominate other cultures.

And when they wrote that we were superstitious, believing in the *mana* of nature and people, they meant that the West has long since lost a deep spiritual and cultural relationship to the earth.

And when they wrote that Hawaiians were “primitive” in their grief over the passing of loved ones, they meant that the West grieves for the living who do not walk among their ancestors.

For so long, more than half my life, I had misunderstood this written record, thinking it described my own people. But my history was nowhere present. For we had not written. We had chanted and sailed and fished and built and prayed. And we had told stories through land.

world where I live, this place, this culture, this from a different world, a Western world.

A while ago I was asked to share a panel on the American overthrow of our government in 1893. The other panelists were all *haole*. But one was a *haole* historian from the mainland who had just published a book on what he called the American anti-imperialists. He and I met briefly in preparation for the panel. I asked him if he knew the language. He said no. I asked him if he knew the record of opposition to our annexation. He and I met briefly on what he called the American anti-imperialists. He and I met briefly.

Finally, I proceeded to relate a personal story, thinking that surely such a tale could not want for authenticity since I myself was relating it. My *tutu* (grandmother) had told my mother who had told me that at the time of annexation (1898) a great wailing went up throughout the islands, a wailing of weeks, a wailing of impenetrable grief, a wailing of pain. Whole libraries begin to form, book upon book, shelf upon shelf. At the same time, the stories go on, generation to generation, family to family.

And when they wrote that we were superstitious because we believed in the spirits of nature and took gifts of plants and fish to the ancient altars.

[A song much loved by our people. It was sung when Hawaiians were forbidden from congregating in groups of more than three. Addressed to our imprisoned Queen, it was written in 1898, and tells of Hawaiian feelings for our land against annexation. Listen to our lament:

Kaulana na pua o'o Hawai'i
Kīpā'a mahope o ka 'āina
Hiki ma ka 'ele e o ka loko 'ino
Palapala 'ānunu me ka pākaha
Pane mai Hawai'i noku o Keawe
Kokua na hono a'o Pi'ilani
Kākō'o mai Kaua'i o mano
Pau pu me ke one o Kukuhihewa

'A'ole a'e kau i ka pūlina
Maluna o ka pepa o ka 'enemi
Hō'ohu 'āina ku'ai hewa
I ka pono sivila a'o ke kānaka
Mahope mākou o Lili'ulani
A loa'a e ka pono o ka 'āina
Ha'ina 'a mai ana ka puana
'O ka po'e i aloha i ka 'āina

This song, I said, continues to be sung with great dignity at Hawaiian political gatherings. For our people still share the feelings of anger and protest that it conveys.

But our guest, the *haole* historian, answered that this song, although beautiful, was not evidence of either opposition or of imperialism from the Hawaiian perspective.

Many Hawaiians in the audience were shocked at his remarks, but, in hindsight, I think they were predictable. They are the standard response of the historian who does not know the language and has no respect for its memory.

Finally, I proceeded to relate a personal story, thinking that surely such a tale could not want for authenticity since I myself was relating it. My *tutu* (grandmother) had told my mother who had told me that at the time of annexation (1898) a great wailing went up throughout the islands, a wailing of weeks, a wailing of impenetrable grief, a wailing of death. But he remarked again, this too is not evidence.

And so, history goes on, written in long volumes by foreign people.

Whole libraries begin to form, book upon book, shelf upon shelf.

At the same time, the stories go on, generation to generation, family to family.

...
Which history do Western historians desire to know? Is it to be a tale of writings by their own countrymen, individuals convinced of their "unique" capacity for analysis, looking at us with Western eyes, thinking about us within Western philosophical contexts, categorizing us by Western indices, judging us by Judeo-Christian morals, exhorting us to capitalist achievements, and finally, leaving us an authoritative—because-Western record of their complete misunderstanding?

All this has been done already. Not merely a few times, but many times. And still, every year, there appear new and eager faces to take up the same telling, as if the West must continue, implacably, with the din of its own disbelief.

But there is, as there has been always, another possibility. If it is truly our history Western historians desire to know, they must put down their books, and take up our practices. First, of course, the language. But later, the people, the ʻAiāna, the stories. Above all, in the end, the stories. Historians must listen, they must hear the generational connections, the reservoir of sounds and meanings.

They must come, as American Indians suggested long ago, to understand the land. Not in the Western way, but in the indigenous way, the way of living within and protecting the bond between people and ʻAiāna.

This bond is cultural, and it can be understood only culturally. But because the West has lost any cultural understanding of the bond between people and land, it is not possible to know this connection through Western culture. This means that the history of indigenous people cannot be written from within Western culture. Such a story is merely the West's story of itself.

Our story remains unwritten. It rests within the culture, which is inseparable from the land. To know this is to know our history. To write this is to write of the land and the people who are born from her.

Cumulative Bibliography
Bingham, Hiram (1848). A Residence of Twenty-one Years in the Sandwich Islands. 2nd ed. New York: Converse.

Engaging the Text
1. What are the key mistakes haole historians have made, according to Trask? Why did they get things wrong?
2. Given the information presented in this selection, explain the Hawaiian understanding of land and natural resources prior to the arrival of white people and discuss the subsequent legal, conceptual, and physical disruptions of the native way of life.
3. Whom do you trust more — Trask or the earlier historians? Why?

Exploring Connections
4. Both Trask and Patricia Nelson Limerick (p. 110) offer revised versions of history. Compare and contrast their goals and methods. Also discuss why, according to these authors, distortions of history arose in the West and in Hawaii.
5. Like Trask, Paula Gunn Allen (p. 241) discovered that the truths of her family and the truths of scholars bore little resemblance to each other. Have you ever learned conflicting "truths" about an important issue? Write your own essay after reviewing Trask's and Allen's essays as models.

Extending the Critical Context
6. More than forty years after World War II, Japanese Americans who were sent to internment camps began receiving some compensation for the unjust and illegal treatment they had suffered. Assume that Trask's history is completely accurate, and debate whether the federal government ought to provide restitution to native Hawaiians (in the form of land or money).
7. Read about Hawaii in one or more of the most recent encyclopedias you can find. Do they reflect any of Trask's thinking, or do they give the traditional versions she denounces? To extend the assignment, critique one or more of the encyclopedia entries in detail, showing how particular sentences hide, distort, or acknowledge the kind of information Trask provides.