

Derek Taira

Forward without Fear: Native Hawaiians and American Education in Territorial Hawai'i, 1900–1941

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Forward without Fear: Native Hawaiians and American Education in Territorial Hawai'i, 1900–1941 by Derek Taira, inspired by the words of Anakalea in the editorial “Ka Olelo Makuahine” printed in *Ka Hoku o Hawai'i* on February 11, 1948, drives us forward. “Imua, me ka hopo ole. I loa ka hoi ia oe ka ike ame ka makaukau i kau olelo pono, o kou lanakila ana no ia.” (“*Forward without fear, so that you shall secure wisdom and preparedness in your own language; this is your victory*”) (172). The book confronts the negative impacts of the Americanization of Hawai'i—specifically in schools in approximately the first half of the twentieth century (1900–1941). Haole foreigners did not believe that Native Hawaiians had the capacity to self-determine their educational futures. Taira states, “primitive, dark-skinned people taking over the very institutions meant to civilize them was an anathema to the American ideas of Manifest Destiny and white supremacy...Native Hawaiians had proven themselves unfit for self-governance in the previous century and needed rigid structure and paternalistic guidance in order to survive the next” (2-3). The imperative was to make Hawai'i safe for America, amenable to American business interests in Hawai'i under the guise of spreading democracy. “The public schools represented critical spaces for Americanizing students as a part of a larger state-building project meant to normalize U.S. authority over the islands” (9). He asserts that through these white educators' and policymakers' cocreation of the trope that “Hawai'i was, and always had been, American,” white settlers executed selective enactment of an empowered Hawai'i citizenry—they would decide who was literate enough to practice democracy and own land. Not surprisingly, many of these early businessmen still enjoy the economic appanages of their early exploits, while Native Hawaiians generally do not. This vanguard of extractive capitalist endeavors elicits an ongoing counter-response through historical and current protective and proactive movements for land, water, and the fight to reconnect to Hawaiian educational legacies that empower students almost one hundred years later.

Taira unpacks systemic approaches that utilized paramouncy through targeted erasure of linguistic and cultural birthrights. Like the “learnings” with other ōiwi populations in America and Canada, one of the many colonial projects of this educational system in Hawai'i was shaming kānaka into “rejecting their backward past” (19) to advance “cultural evolution” through mastery of the English language. Lorrin Thurston, a leader of the Committee of Safety, which orchestrated the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom with support from the US Military, boasted, “not the growth of a day, but of two generations, so that even to the native Hawaiian it appears to be the natural order of things” (41). Being a “good native” was tantamount to acceptance of the “new” ways. Imposing a curriculum of erasure was not enough for the colonizers; they also demanded fealty from those in the schools' employ. “The

principal function of the public schools in the Territory of Hawaii is to produce loyal American citizens. Good American citizenship is more important than scholarship” (97).

Taira’s work proceeds with the kūpuna sharing intimate mo’olelo (stories) of this time. He begins, “Pauline’s grandparents had deliberately chosen not to speak Hawaiian to her mother and her siblings as they grew up, believing that the ‘English language would be THE language and that the learning of their native language would make it harder for them to learn English” (111). This story is common among families of this time. As a Kanaka Maoli, I found this not to be a casual read. I thought of my grandmother, Alice Ku’uleimomikai Amina (1921–2000) of Waiākea, Hawai‘i, and her educational recollections of this time, being part of the first generations of Hawaiian keiki where the native language was not as freely spoken or encouraged in the home, and children were punished for doing so at school. Given these truths, this progression provides clarification and perhaps hope during times of traumatic generational transition.

Contrary to the dominant narrative of the civilization of the “savage” child in need of paternalistic guidance, Taira states the following regarding ‘ohana participation in this new educational system. “Their supportive influence reinforced a constructive and pragmatic understanding that survival in an Americanized Hawai‘i required active participation at school” (81). Like my grandmother, many ‘ohana utilized these educational experiences to excel in the world of this new educational world while still holding on to core cultural values.

While Taira speaks to the treachery, he also elucidates the steadfast nature of our kūpuna. “By 1953, after over a half-century of occupation, the campaign to win the hearts and minds of Native Hawaiian youths remained far from a success” (95). Taira’s analysis concludes with many ‘ōiwi students maintaining their identities by becoming teachers in this co-opted, yet powerful system. While we can point to the many devastating causes of cultural and linguistic erosion, these examples serve as blueprints for how we can shift our current educational paradigms, inspired and uplifted by dedicated educational leaders. IMUA, let us move forward to reimagine the possibilities of education in Hawai‘i, ever mindful of the stirring words of Anakalea as he continues, “E ala e na Hawaii opio, e apo i ka kakou olelo makuahine a imua hoi a loaia kakou ka lanakila. Ma o ka ‘loaa ana o ka makaukau ika olelo Hawaii.” (*Awaken young Hawaiians retain our mother language and move forward until we have the lei of victory, through proficiency in the Hawaiian language.*) Ultimately returning to the mother tongue without fear.

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