
Cultural Identity and Liminal Places in Contemporary Literature of Hawai'i

REBECCA HOGUE
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

At the center of the Pacific Ocean, the Hawaiian Islands experience a liminal identity in the American imagination that is both isolating and alluring. Although politically annexed to the United States, the Islands' history as an immigrant destination among the indigenous population engenders a socio-cultural identity that is deeper than post-colonial; it becomes a place of what Rob Wilson called "transnational limbo" (314). Two recent works, Kauai Hart Hemmings' *The Descendants* and Tara Bray Smith's *West of Then*, explore themes of cultural hybridity as the protagonists reexamine their individual identities as products of the collective social landscape. In a place with a dwindling indigenous population and an ever-growing array of immigrants, "local" identity remains disputed and residents struggle to define their cultural relationships with their heritage. Many residents, like Hemmings' and Smith's characters, are descendants of both the settlers as well as the subaltern, looking to find their identity somewhere in their perception of the land. The setting of the Hawaiian Islands is a symbol of liminality within the context of its contemporary literature, and each author's narrative techniques illuminate the socio-cultural and geographic tensions that contribute to the unsettled identity for the inhabitants of Hawai'i well after annexation.

Hemmings' *Descendants* addresses just what its title might suggest, the implications of lineage and an experience far removed from one's ancestors, as Matt King, a part-kānaka maoli (Hawaiian), part-*haole* (white), wealthy lawyer and land owner, is torn over the prospect of selling the land that belonged to his ancestors while his wife is in a coma. *West of Then* also addresses issues of family, but of time and the importance of geography, as it reveals the story of her quest to find her homeless mother while exploring her family's history. As each author explores Hawai'i, series of people and events come to define the place, or as geographer Doreen Massey argues, "what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations, articulated, together at a particular locus" (Massey 66).

Āina, land, functions as a metonym, or in Massey's words, locus, for the Hawaiian people and their cultural heritage. While these two authors approach the place of Hawai'i from two different narrative genres, Hemmings as fiction and Smith as memoir, both succeed in accurately portraying a people tussled between the past and future over the land the Hawaiians call home. Hemmings' is a work of fiction, and often reads like a memoir, as she shares both Hawaiian and European ancestry like her protagonist, Matt King, but ultimately does not identify herself as a "Hawaiian writer" (Cooper 1). Smith is the descendant of white settler colonizers, and much of the memoir examines her frustrations with being *haole* in Hawai'i. Each author lived similar upbringings in Hawai'i—they attended the same high school, came from historically powerful families, and both moved away to gain a new perspective on Hawai'i's cultural identity—nevertheless, both examine the place of Hawai'i and its people through a critical eye, wary of its colonial history and the indigenous relationship to the land.

Smith prefaces her memoir with a political map of Hawai'i. She begins, "Let us orient ourselves" (2) and continues to explain Hawai'i's geographic location on the globe: "We are on the most isolated inhabited landmass on the globe; there is nothing as populated for thousands of miles in any direction. East is west; West is east" (3). In the Islands, because of the ancient system of land division known as *ahupua'a*, where the property is divided from mountain to ocean, *mauka* to *makai*, places are referenced in relation to the ocean or the mountains, not east and west. According to Smith, as the descendant of settler colonizers, much feels backwards—time, culture—and it begins with geography. Kānaka Maoli literature scholar ku'ualooha ho'omanawanui provides the following equation form to explain the differences between Hawaiian and *haole* perceptions of the land: "Hawaiian: 'āina → food → nurturing/sustaining → *value of family*. Haole: land → real estate/commodity/ → buying/selling → *monetary value*" (ho'omanawanui 124). In these terms, the 'āina or land's identity then reveals the cultural identity of the viewer. The determination of this view becomes precisely the issue for Smith and Hemmings, as Smith's narrator explores her relationship with Hawai'i in relation to her family history but not as her genealogy, while Hemmings' Matt King struggles to identify with the 'āina while believing he should. This land consciousness, or lack thereof, then embodies the challenges presented by colonization and its aftermath, as ho'omanawanui concludes: "in the Kānaka Maoli worldview, the connection between Kānaka and 'āina is not just theoretical; it is direct" (125).

In terms of colonial impact, Hawai'i's cultural identity in the Western imagination began to shift during the conquests of European Imperialism in the

late 18th and early 19th centuries. Initially, the lure of adding Hawai'i to empire was an economic motivation, as critic Rob Wilson notes that "geography was being restructured along oceanic pathways of economic flux and cultural liquidity that were linking space—and racial frontier—of Asia and the Pacific to international and global designs centered in Europe and the United States"; ultimately Hawai'i became the "western outpost of Anglo Saxon civilization and a vantage ground of American commerce in the Pacific" (521-22). After interest from a number of Western nations as well as Japan, the United States annexed Hawai'i in 1898 after its monarchy had been overthrown five years prior. This cultural usurpation began at the point of Western contact at the end of the 18th century, and has steadily crept into all aspects of Hawaiian life from cultural practices to the built environment to ethnically mixed families. Now, American hegemony permeates through modern Hawai'i culture, and both Smith and Hemmings effectively portray the unstable identities of products this settler colony.

During the twentieth century, Hawai'i became progressively more suburbanized, turning small towns into strip malls—a transformation Hemmings' protagonist admits he likes. In the hospital, Matt expresses his discomfort living in Hawai'i, despite it being the place of his ancestors: "I run down the hall with my daughter, feeling like I'm in some other country. All around, people speak pidgin English and glare at the two of us like we're crazy white fools, even though we're Hawaiian" (18). Matt's discomfort arises from the loss of his indigenous identity and a personal obliviousness to anything outside of his work, demonstrating his own mental colonization. He contemplates his own land and reflects on his level of content with Westernization: "We drive through Kailua town, which has been recently remodeled to look like a strip mall in any nice suburb in America. Tourists are everywhere, and they've never come to our town much before. I know that when I sell the land the buyer will develop it into something exactly like this, even though I like the way the strip mall looks" (Hemmings 30-31). After Matt becomes aware of his neglect and subsequent family ills, he begins a transformation toward recognizing the effects of colonialism and begins reclaiming his indigenous identity.

The land itself becomes a reminder of heritage, as the landscape impacts Matt's historical memory when visiting another island: "I feel as though I've gone back in time. There's an abandoned look to Hawai'i, like it's just been hit by a tsunami.... The air gets colder, and there's a slight vog hanging over everything—a cross between fog and volcanic ash, the smell of it like gunpowder—that adds to the mood of abandonment and destruction" (Hemmings 79). Matt's family trauma mirrors Hawai'i's—neglect, change, and ambivalence. Colonized Hawai'i looks nothing like the Hawai'i of old. This Hawai'i was American, suburban, and

commercialized. Smith, too, identifies these losses, but only within the context of imperialism: “This was America, though, the fiftieth state.... Tom Seleck had once lived right down the road.... So had Jack Lord. Other than a few remaining plantations, Hawai’i sugar was gone. Kahala Mall had a Gap and a Banana Republic and a Starbucks” (22). In the early 21st century, Hawai’i had become something unrecognizable to both Hawaiians and its early settlers. With the introduction of increasingly more foreigners and a host of new immigrant laborers to support Hawai’i’s tourism industry, Hawai’i’s economic growth perpetuated the tensions created by colonialism.

By the mid-20th century, Hawai’i itself became a product. Far removed from the continental United States but with the exposure of television shows, Hollywood films, and a booming tourism industry, it became a marketed as a haven for those wanted to escape the pressures of their world. Just as her ancestors experienced as immigrants who came to Hawai’i and had success in the sugar industry in the 19th century, Smith inherited the American belief that “Hawai’i itself [was] a land that could cure what ailed you” and that “paradise changed people, made them better than they were before: richer, more powerful. Regular people became royalty” (69, 71). Following foreign economic success after annexation in addition to its stunning physical beauty, Hawai’i became a utopia for the outside consumer.

Paradise, as Hemmings’ and Smith’s pieces point out, has its limitations, but the overwhelming perception persists, as Ann Rayson notes: “Nothing, it is thought, ever happens in Hawai’i or changes there, “there” as opposed to “here.” Hawai’i fulfills the role of America’s Shangri-la, seemingly far removed from the divisive racial tensions and domestic problems of the “real” America” (1). Hawai’i becomes an unattainable fiction for its visitors, as its history and the identity of its people are far from ideal. This post-modern sense of the dark side of paradise runs rampant through *The Descendants* and *West of Then*. For both authors, cynicism permeates many layers of their work, from the environment, family, individual identity, and the future. Hemmings begins her novel with the environment, but instead of as a structural framework of place like Smith’s, Hemmings introduces the environment with a cynical approach in order to convey the disillusioned version of Hawai’i she is about to portray: “The sun is shining, mynah birds are chattering, palm trees are swaying, so what” (3). Smith’s doubts about paradise are equally overt, as she conveys in one dialogue between her mother and a friend: “you grew up here? Paradise, man. Paradise.’ ... I shuddered. This? This was nothing” (Smith 133). Paradise connotes a place where life’s ills cannot befall you, much less a place burdened with racial tension and guilt, which is in this case manifested in the same individual, like Hemmings’ Matt King.

Similarly, expectations of paradise leave little to look forward to. As Smith expresses, “When you’re from paradise, where do you go from there?” (33). The socially imposed expectations of paradise leave individuals like Smith with an indeterminate sense of purpose and a confused identity. As she ages and matures, much like Matt King’s personal awakening, Smith recognizes the shortcomings of paradise due to the education of life experience and her knowledge of history. She contends, “We don’t believe in paradise because paradise is inviolate, and nothing on earth, since the age of the ship and the airplane, is inviolate. Everything fell apart a long time ago” (Smith 89). Smith’s disillusionment is not limited to herself and her personal experiences. Hemmings addresses this discontent with a series of binaries: “We have breadfruit, bananas and mangoes, but all of these things rot and bring flies. We have a sparkling pool, but at the end of the day, it’s filled with leaves.... We have gorgeous soft wood floors, but we also have flying cockroaches, cane spiders, termites and centipedes that love these wooden floors and rafters as well” (49). Paradise is not what one might think it should be; in both works, the juxtaposition of opposites further highlights the tensions of the characters’ cultural identity. Furthermore, these texts mostly avoid discussing the gulf between the rich and poor, as *haole* and Asian settlers enjoy most of the wealth and political power in the Islands, while Hawaiians and other Polynesians make up most of those below the poverty line. Although Smith’s memoir does address homelessness and its growing prevalence in Hawai‘i, she presents it as a mental health issue and abstains from delving into some of the contributing factors of Native Hawaiian homelessness.

While the history of Hawai‘i begins with its indigenous population, many of its current social tensions arise from the lack of recognition given to those who trace their genealogy there, as connected to the concept of land ownership. Similar to the plight of the Native American peoples in the continental United States, for the Hawaiians, land and identity go hand in hand when it comes to developing a sense of one’s place in the social landscape. One geographer contends, “While all cultural landscapes are understood to be contested spaces among competing stakeholders, this insight firmly centers the cultural landscape ... within the greater and more pronounced struggles for domination and autonomy” (Kingsbury 53). Since the arrival of Westerners to Hawai‘i, the battle for autonomy has persisted throughout various cultural movements and political regimes. In the 1960s and ’70s, Hawaiians experienced a resurgence in identity reclamation, commonly referred to as the Hawaiian Renaissance, where people of Hawaiian descent, *kānaka maoli*, began expressing interest in and performing traditional native Hawaiian practices. This movement began with the specific intention of counteracting the

tourist driven perceptions of Hawaiian culture and addressed the Americanization of the people and their practices. Traditional Hawaiian songs (*mele*), hula, crafts, and Hawaiian Studies became exceedingly more popular among k̄naka maoli, along with Hawaiian Sovereignty, the notion that Hawai'i should once again become its own nation.

For the k̄naka maoli, the land is the genealogical origin, not a possession. As ho'omanawanui contends, "āina does not translate to 'landscape' because landscape implies a pristine, panoramic view of the land devoid of human beings; by being 'land that feeds,' aina automatically includes humans ... we are descended from the land and are *related to* and not *separate from* elements of 'nature'" (128). The state motto of Hawai'i, "*ua mau ke ea o ka 'āina i ka pono*," the life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness, was written by King Kamehameha III in 1843, after the Islands were nearly annexed by the British. For native Hawaiians, the islands are the "*one hānau*," the "birth sands;" as Candace Fujikane argues: "Mixed race Hawaiians are still genealogical descendants of the land despite their settler ancestries; to argue anything less is an act of colonial theft that takes Hawaiians' genealogical heritage away from them" (5). Hemmings demonstrates these effects of colonization in *The Descendants*: while driving on a neighbor island, Matt points out a historic location with which his daughter is unfamiliar; surprised, he asks, "What kind of Hawaiian are you?" To which she astutely responds, "Your kind" (79). This catalyzes Matt's ownership of his identity as a Hawaiian, and not just as a father trying to catch up on the family life he has ignored. Hemmings details this recognition through Matt's assessment of history: "But now I find myself not wanting to give it up—the land, the lush relic of our tribe, the dead. The last Hawaiian owned land will be lost, and I will have something to do with it. Even though we don't look Hawaiian, even though our constant recombining has erased the evidence of our ethnicity, sharpening our flat faces, straightening our kinky hair, even though we act like *haoles*, going to private schools and clubs and not having a good command of pidgin English, my girls and I are Hawaiian, and this land is ours" (79). With generations of marriages, the progressive acquisition of American values, and the gentrification of small towns, Hawaiians became virtually unrecognizable, even to themselves. Hemmings avoids rendering this cultural shift as an ethnic cleansing, but rather as the gradual displacement of the subaltern. For Hemmings, familial tragedy is the agent of change for her characters to recognize their mental colonization, and the impact of their genealogy.

While the reclamation of indigenous identity proves invigorating for some Native Hawaiians, it further complicates the identity of those who identify as multiethnic as the products of colonialism and immigration. Some individuals,

such as the characters in Smith's and Hemmings' books, find themselves torn between their indigenous heritage and their colonial acculturation. As sociologist Keri E. Iyall Smith notes, "The individual occupying a hybrid space navigates between two cultural groups and occupies a space with both cultural groups. This space holds both a challenge and a privilege" (73). Hemmings' Matt King recognizes this hybrid identity and its problems: "I think of our bloodline's progression. Our missionary ancestors came to the islands and told the Hawaiians to put on some clothes, work hard, and stop hula dancing. They make some business deals on the way, buying an island for ten grand, or marrying a princess and inheriting her land, and now their descendants don't work. They have stripped down to running shorts or bikinis and play beach volleyball and take up hula dancing" (157). For his character, these notions prove excessively challenging, as he identifies as both a descendant of the missionaries, as well as the Hawaiians they displaced. After Matt loses his wife, he shifts his values to his family and its history, replacing his bitterness over the frivolity of modern day Hawai'i culture with recognition of his family's history. He concludes, "We're Hawaiian—it's a miracle we own this much of Hawai'i. Why let some *haole* swoop it up? We've been careless" (Hemmings 230). Matt's progression from missionary descendant to Hawaiian is a dramatic shift in self-identification, but ultimately does not arrive at one definitive racial identity at the end of the novel, but rather one revolved around his immediate family. Smith, too, acknowledges a hybrid identity; hers is cultural instead of racial. She begins her final chapter with a Hawaiian proverb on ancestry and identity: "*ku'u ewe, ku'u piko, ku'u iwi, ku'u koko*" (my umbilical cord, my navel, my bones, my blood) (Smith 263). As *ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui* explains, "the word "iwi" (bones), a metaphorical reference to people, is synonymous with both being Native to a place and being one's homeland" (125). While Smith's appropriation of Hawaiian culture may be deemed problematic because she does not ethnically identify as such, she nonetheless attempts to pay homage to Hawai'i's indigenous people, despite not being able to articulate the ideological influences of the passage. She ends her novel with recognition of Hawai'i's identity as a settler colony, and attempts to acknowledge both its indigenous past and its present American identity: "The coiner of the term manifest destiny was obsessed with the idea that America was new, unburdened by history. In Hawai'i the past is not extinct. Ghosts just want to be heard, which is why we remember them" (Smith 308). While Smith may not be Hawaiian herself, as an individual influenced by native culture she, too, has carried on the traditions of honoring family and ancestry. Hemmings' Matt King echoes these sentiments: "And even though the art of wayfinding has been lost to me, I try to steer us to shore in as straight a line as possible" (283). Hemmings does

not end the novel by rectifying her protagonist's absence or lack of commitment to his ancestry, but suggests attempts to set the right course. Ultimately, Matt decides to keep the land, and in turn, he reclaims parts of his culture that he had ignored, and is closer to reconciling his identity in this complex place he calls home.

Both *The Descendants* and *West of Then* mark an important awareness of the colonial history and subsequent racial politics for the people of Hawai'i. In the American imagination, the geographic location in the Pacific, coupled with the Islands' physical beauty engendered a utopian vision that ultimately proved to be an environment filled with tension. While each author expresses her relationship with the Hawaiian people from differing vantage points, one as mixed-race Hawaiian and the other as the descendant of a settler, each ultimately concludes at a position of admiration for native traditions and a desire to acknowledge indigenous culture. Hemmings and Smith do not provide us a solution for the issues of cultural hybridity, but rather, educate the rest of the world on Hawai'i's rich, albeit transitional identity with an evolving appreciation of place.

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