

HE HAWAI'I AU I AM HAWAIIAN

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“You’re not Hawaiian,” they’ve said to me, or “You’re not really Hawaiian,” or Hawaiian enough.

There were subtle hints given all the time when I was growing up. I was that cousin—the townie, the one who got into Kamehameha—while most of my Hawaiian cousins grew up in Wai‘anae, Mākaha, Nānākuli where my mother was born. I am an only child, raised by two always working parents in an urban setting. Basically, I was an alien from outer space. I was the girl going to “the Hawaiian school:” Kamehameha, the kula on the pu‘u, the Hawaiian City on the Hill. But I wasn’t really Hawaiian because they all talked pidgin and my speech didn’t match theirs. Also, I preferred reading and didn’t know how to play outside. It made me think, “If you enjoy reading and writing, it makes you less Hawaiian, if you talk pidgin good you are more Hawaiian.” By the time I was twelve, they were saying “Oh, you going be one school teacha.”

But the first time I was explicitly declared not Hawaiian I was a Sophomore. My debate teacher was standing over me exasperated. She said in front of the whole class:

“You’re too argumentative, you’re SO NOT HAWAIIAN.”

At the time, I don’t remember caring all that much about being called, “not Hawaiian!” and I pointed out to her calmly that “we are in a debate class, where you are supposed to be argumentative.” Kāhāhā ho‘i!

The second time it happened I was on a tour of the U.S. with the school dorkestra. We stopped in Cincinnati for nearly a week to participate in the Congress of Strings—I was a violinist. A tall African-American girl said to me, “You’re not Hawaiian. Those pretty girls,” she said, gesturing to my two girlfriends, “they’re

HaWAlian.” Pretty? In the moment I tried to figure out what she was seeing that allowed her to pass such a judgment. I remember trying to freeze the smile on my face in order to not let her see that my heart was sinking down into my sneakers. I was completely embarrassed.

I have a darker complexion. It was summer, and I brown up fantastically. One friend was hapa Haole, the other Haole Hawaiian-Chinese. One modeled in Japan. Both were lighter-skinned than I. It made me think: “pretty girls with light skin who are hapa Haole or Asian are more Hawaiian, and I’m ugly.” My father is Ilocano and my mother is Hawaiian. That makes me hapa too, but apparently the wrong kind.



I remember that time it hit me like a punch in the stomach, but it wouldn't be until my late twenties that I would care about what it meant to “be a Hawaiian” and pay attention to when I was perceived as more or less “Hawaiian.”

The third time it happened I was in my mid-twenties and attending my second or third oli class when the teacher barred my entry into the room. “You don't belong here” he said. I was perplexed. “Why?” I asked. “Because you don't speak Hawaiian,” he replied in an irritated, self satisfied tone. Amused, I made a

show of peering over his shoulder at the other older students in the classroom. “Well,” I said, “the haole students in class don’t speak Hawaiian?” He turned to look back at them and then me. “Ya,” he replied, “but YOU should know better.”

My girlfriend taking the class with me had heard enough; she excused herself and never came back. I looked at him and said “well, too bad I paid my \$35 to be in your class,” and ducked under his arm to begin my full immersion in the Hawaiian language through music, oratory and performance. He refused me entry that day, but became my favorite teacher; I eventually followed him home. He was trained in a hālau people revere now, he was challenging, deeply engaging, and spoke Hawaiian fluidly, seductively. As we learned chants and songs I couldn’t look the words up in a dictionary fast enough. The message was opposite the one I had learned all my life: if you are Hawaiian, you need to know MORE.

Supreme irony: eventually I learned that my debate teacher’s name meant “without beauty.”

I took every class he taught and eventually followed him home. I would stay at his house, go with him to the beach, wash car, some afternoons we wouldn’t say a word. I would sit at his kitchen table while his friends listened to him regale them with stories of the past, of the ali’i. He would share family chant and genealogy books.

One day he was on the telephone laughing and talking in Hawaiian, clearly enjoying himself and pleased to make me wait. 5 minutes went by. 10. I was getting more and more irritated. We were supposed to be going to get lunch and time was running out. He kept talking. By the time he hung up I was really angry. “I’m going to learn Hawaiian,” I said, “Just. To. Spite. You.” A little smile appeared on his lips, and in a sarcastic tone I had grown used to said: “Whatever it takes.”

Whatever it takes.

He took me to my first Merry Monarch Festival and, sitting with me in the stands, simultaneously translated chants as they leapt into the air. I learned then that chanting is the story, that the words carry mana, because it was his voice I was attuned to. We traversed roads deeply familiar to him that I had never seen or heard in Hawaiian, and his passion for knowledge, for knowing, made me want to learn more.

Whatever it takes.

“What, you still in fucking school?” one of my relatives asked me one summer during a break from my PhD program. Various people in my ‘ohana took an interest in what I was doing—I was still the reader, still on my way to becoming a teacher—but they didn’t really think school was bad, and they didn’t not love me. This question was a test, a ho‘opa‘apa‘a. In one sense it was a not so subtle way to say “You think you better than us? You think because you study Hawaiian stuff, you more Hawaiian than us?” Some people imagine that formal education makes people “less Hawaiian.” But in another sense this relative wanted to see if I would take offense, curl up and stop. Could I be provoked to anger and show my true colors as the kind of hō‘oio who saw them as “bad” Hawaiians who didn’t measure up to my schooling?

They wanted to see if I would fall into the kinds of traps that had been set for me when I was younger. In what ways would I pass on what I came to know? Who would be there to listen, to feel? Today the Hawaiian language is my lightning rod, and through it I hear and feel in a different aspect. For me Hawaiian is more a language of intimacy, of closeness, of aloha.

Once, I dreamt that someone I have great affection for was sitting on the edge of my bed and speaking to me in Hawaiian for the first time. My heart swelled with elation at the thought that the two of us could share this moment. I woke weeping, painfully disappointed to realize that these feelings of warmth were a dream..

Since then I have carefully checked my behavior when in the presence of this person, because to speak to someone who cannot understand you is to harm them in some way. It says to them “you are not really Hawaiian,” which is never my intention. And now that time has passed, I am not quite sure who is asleep, or who is dreaming or who is really awake.

However, he manaleo ku‘u na‘au . My heart is a native speaker.

