Gazing Back: Communing with Our Ancestors

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It's hard for me to believe, but it has been nearly nineteen years since I first sat in David Hanlon's World Civilization's course along with about 300 other undergraduates. It was a huge theatre, too large for just one haole professor with a quiet and untheatrical demeanor, who showed one film the whole semester and relied on an overhead projector to show his lecture outline as his only other visual aid. It was too large a room and too impersonal a setting and he was too unassuming a teacher to have had such a profound impact on my life.

I was not even middle-aged then, and I am elderly now. And it has been the blink of an eye.

In that blink I have become a historian myself, ʻae, but also a kumu, a teacher for my people, the ʻŌiwi, the Kanaka Maoli, the poʻe Hawaiʻi. I have added three children in that time and have watched my firstborn reach adulthood, travel to university, return, and marry. I watched my mother battle cancer and succumb, and I imagine her present at every important function of my life, including the wedding of my son. And these are not just aimless images I am presenting to you now, but the very stuff of life, the things that entrance us, that grasp and shake us, these events we should remember and memorialize in our histories.

My mother links me to a lineage of Native aliʻi and Kahuna, as well as Hakka immigrants from southern China and Americans of German ancestry, most recently from Dayton, Ohio. My father's moʻokuʻauhau is simpler and more substantial to me since I met some of his relatives in Portugal over 30 years ago, and his mother, a full blooded ʻŌiwi woman of kaukau aliʻi descent was such a presence in my childhood. As for my mother's non-native relatives—her American father arrived in Hawaiʻi determined to cut himself off from his family, while her memory of her Chinese grandfather was a faint and dream-like whisper of an old man and a cloud of opium smoke. They are present, these ancestors, but mostly in a limited version of my imagination. I cannot imagine what they sounded like, what they looked like. I cannot imagine what they would have thought of me.

But when I conjure up the presence of my Kupuna ʻŌiwi, I have much less trouble envisioning their relationship with me and hearing their opinions, approving and otherwise, about my children. I see them when I teach the history of the Hawaiian nation, the Lāhui. I see them working the earth and joyful in the sea. I see them in love, betrayal, and grief. I see them plant and build, and I see them prepare for war. Mostly, I see them gazing expectantly at me. And I gaze back.

Somewhere in the middle of seeing my mother's life weaken and my first book actually materialize I came to the realization that I had become a very odd sort of historian. I had come to believe that the stories and epics that I knew were important not because they represented people and events whose existence and occurrences could be verified, but because they were lessons to me, and to anyone who cared to listen, about who we are and how we should live our lives. I teach and I write moʻolelo—not history, perhaps as you all know it. I tell stories.

Some of the stories I tell are what you might expect from a historian. In a class called Post-contact chiefs of Hawaiʻi I spend three lectures on the life and times of Kamehameha Paiea, Ka Naʻi Aupuni (the Conqueror). This is a fascinating story for Hawaiians, I find. It is not only a story of conquest and political strategy, not only an account of how European and American technologies and aims are enfolded in the fierce changes at the dawn of the nineteenth century, not just a history to inspire a sense of glory in our past. No, these are stories of real people acting in very understandable ways. These are families in love and intrigue with one another. They are stories about jealousy and honor, about suspicion and disdain, about ambition and loyalty, venality and vision. They are leadership stories and they are supremely important to my own people in our time and place.

I speak of these men and women in ways that I hope enable every Hawaiian in the audience to identify with them. I myself put faces on these men and women, these great chiefs who are still remembered with such aloha by the Kanaka Maoli, and they are the faces of people whom I knew in this life. I embellish by reconstructing their characters

with what has been recounted about these aliʻi in spoken tales and published accounts—Kamehameha was a reluctant dictator, not at all eager to kill the cousin who stood in the way of his supremacy on Hawaiʻi island. I think he possessed an imagination capable of seeing a life of ease and laughter, and I believe he had more than a little resentment for the warrior chiefs like Keʻeaumoku, the disappointed and easily insulted Kona chief who pushed Kamehameha to adopt the discipline of war. I picture the conqueror as large and clear-eyed, very sharp but with an easy sense of humor and no particular axe to grind with anyone. I picture him late in life, almost bemused by what his work had wrought.

I believe that I can understand the motivations and behaviors of great chiefs like Kamehameha because I have seen such behavior and attitudes among the people who surrounded me in my youth; gentle, easy people for the most part, but tempered by an unyielding discipline, dignity, and self-respect. I always knew that such self-respect came out of a practice of respect for individuals who earned it, and for that reason, I always understood that our ancient deference to great chiefs, or Aliʻi Nui as we reverently called them, was nested not in obsequiousness but in an unflagging pride, almost haughtiness, with which we carried ourselves.

Examples abound. Consider the warrior chiefs of the Kauaʻi Aliʻi Nui Kaneoneo who accompanied their Mōʻī aboard the Discovery when it landed at Waimea Bay in 1778. When Captain Clerke, in all innocence, clapped the shoulder of the sacred Aliʻi Nui, it took the restraint of the chief himself to prevent his warriors from killing Clerke then and there for his violation of the kapu. I also wonder what sort of expression Hawaiʻi island Mōʻī Kalaniʻōpuʻu must have worn when James Cook returned his gift of his own magnificent ʻahuʻula—feathered cloak—with the cotton shirt he was wearing. What did Cook see in the aspect of this chief—was it incredulousness? Contempt? Whatever it was, the Mōʻiʻs countenance must have communicated something across the cultural divide, for Cook reconsidered and added the gift of his sabre.

To visualize these ancestors is to verify not only their identities, but our own identities as well. Furthermore, portraying the behavior of these great chiefs in ways that are sensible to us, not only humanizes them, but humanizes history, as we start to understand that there are not really mysterious forces behind historical events—history is simply the result of humans being themselves.

For Hawaiians, ancestry is the root of everything that we know and everything that is knowable about ourselves. There is probably not a person alive today who, with even a miniscule amount of Hawaiian blood, could not trace his or her descent to one or more of the great chiefly lineages that stretch back close to one hundred generations to Papahānaumoku and Wākea. These two ancestors are credited with having birthed Hawaiʻi Paeʻāina: the islands, taro, and all human beings. No matter how we have been changed, transformed by conversion, dispossession, and even the seductions of modern society; no matter how shattering the great dying of our people at the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth, even a drop of Hawaiian blood connects one to thousands of years of ancestors who populated these islands and those of the South Pacific.

Ancestry is what is left, after the loss of people and lands, after the seizure of our government, after the loss of language and the steady demoralization of our people young and old. We are still able to connect to the dizzyingly vibrant days when our chiefs numbered in the tens of thousands and our people were as numerous as the sand and stars. We do not connect with them in symbolic and imaginative ways only; through our moʻolelo and moʻokūʻauhau, we may treasure our own lives as continuations of theirs and take pride in grafting our stories and our lineages onto the ones that they established.

In 1999, a U.S. Supreme Court decision brought an end to nearly two decades of election practices through which ʻŌiwi had been able to select trustees to the state's Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA). This practice was challenged by a haole rancher as discriminatory, which of course, it was. In response to the arguments posed by the state of Hawaiʻi that such discrimination was not based on race but ancestry, the Supreme Court chose not to make a distinction, and based on that blurring of distinctions, Harold Rice and his friends have spent the last few years suing the very existence of OHA, the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands, the Hawaiian preference admission policy of the Kamehameha Schools, and the tuition waivers that are occasionally granted to a few hundred Native Hawaiian students at the University of Hawaiʻi.

In our struggle to retain these small, yet very critical resources for our own people, we have been caught in a strange net of discourse over race, entitlement, and law that, of course, is woven into America's own terrible history of slavery and apartheid. While it appears that this struggle is defined in American legal and historical terms, the deeper and more critical issue is whether we may protect our ancestral connections and maintain them as meaningful legacies for our children and grandchildren. For of all of the cultural legacies we may still possess, the loss of this legitimacy of blood is a loss both of legal protection and our own sense of history.

When I began to research the dissertation that produced the book *Dismembering Lāhui*, I was primarily interested in examining law as a discursive power. I had no idea that immersing myself in legislative journals, constitutional convention minutes, and newspaper editorials would subject me to such an incredible array of individuals, Kanaka ʻŌiwi, who had never before been portrayed in anyone's history. I learned from their words and their struggles how complex an institution the Kingdom was; how systematically it betrayed the interests of the poor and powerless among our people in favor of the commerce and promise of sugar, and how, nevertheless, the Kingdom was beloved. I learned that our people appreciated the ironies of modern law, and understood quite clearly when it was used against them, but once having pledged to the law, they obeyed it unstintingly.

I saw them confront the waves of diseases that killed off their families and stunted new generations, while missionaries and businessmen, often one and the same, pronounced them unfit and predicted their annihilation. I saw them respond to those pronouncements with a grace and dignity that in these times especially, is unimaginable. There is no simple way to describe the predicament of our nineteenth century ancestors. Persuaded that law and democracy were more reliable protectors of the lāhui than the leadership of aliʻi, they adapted and learned to accommodate the law and the strange people who brought the notions of law to our islands. They allowed the law to make fortunes for those strangers and clung to the belief that so long as they could maintain their kinship with one another, all would eventually be well.

They shared governance and citizenship with haole, and with Asians, and never once fashioned constitutions that would discriminate against anyone because of their race or national origins. Yet they were, I think, unsurprised that haole made racist laws as soon as they succeeded in taking power. Our nineteenth century ʻŌiwi had heard over and over again about their inferiority and the inferiority of others to Europeans long enough, that in 1887, when the ancestors of Harold Rice forced King David Kalākaua to sign a constitution guaranteeing white rule in Hawaiʻi, while disenfranchising hundreds of Asian citizens, it must have seemed more banal than astonishing.

They had been warned, after all, not only by dozens of Kanaka statesmen who had pointed to the rising wealth and arrogance of Europeans and Americans in the islands as a danger to the Lāhui's existence, but also by those same Euro-American businessmen, church leaders, and writers who had, for decades assured the Kanaka Maoli that they were Godless, ignorant, incapable, and doomed. Yet these are not bitter observations only; I am also astonished that our people would bear the burden of these accusations of their inadequacy with such overwhelming decorum and forbearance. And most of all, I find it telling that faced with simply surrendering to the overwhelming American ideology that we are better off as citizens of their most powerful nation, we still prefer to be ourselves.

That is ancestry. One does not have to remember only the great warrior chiefs like Kamehameha to feel pride in our nation, we can but look back three or four generations to a people who had forsaken warfare, who were literate and landless, but intensely loyal to one another and fiercely loved their Queen. In some ways I do believe that the government seized by Americans in 1893 was an empty gourd; the real nation, the Lāhui, was intact and continued to live on homesteads, on beaches, in prisons, through music and hula, and because of families that continued the old values of cooperation, sharing, and even sacrifice. It was, after all, young men and women in my generation who defied the U.S. Navy and the federal government and embraced the island of Kahoʻolawe as an ancestral sibling, facing arrest, or even dismemberment and death in order to bring an end to the destruction of that island and her return to our care.

Oh yes. These are the stories, the moʻolelo that we tell in our classrooms. These are the secrets that we share with our haumāna, our students. "ʻO ʻoe ka Lāhui" "You are the nation." And with every story we tell that demonstrates our

ancestors living their lives, every splendid and petty pursuit, every gesture of magnanimity and reprisal, we draw closer to one another and celebrate our kinship.

In the end we will defeat every effort to make us disappear. Our memory of our ancestors who faced greater uncertainties than ours will sustain us. Ironically, it is the very antithesis of racism, our willingness—no, eagerness—to mate with every possible ethnicity that empowers our race. Harold Rice and Thurston Twigg-Smith ought to fear us, and not because of the piddling "entitlements" that they seek to end. They ought to fear that sooner or later, one of their children or grandchildren is going to fall in love with one of ours. Then they'll have their hands full.

I began this essay with a tribute to a great teacher and would like to finish by gesturing back to David Hanlon again. I said he was an unassuming teacher. I cannot tell you how important I think that is. To teach without assuming that you are changing the world is to change the world, even if it's the world of one person's imagination. To tutor and correct without imposing oneself is not merely a generous act, it is for me and the way I approach history and teaching, the key to both enterprises.

When we tell these moʻolelo, we could whisper—E hāmau (be silent). This story is of someone you may know. Listen to their voices. Let them remind you of who you are. E hāmau a hoʻolohe. Be silent and listen.

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