Strategies of Erasure: U.S. Colonialism and Native Hawaiian Feminism

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Within the many sites of teaching and learning I have inhabited, I have been consistently struck by the phenomenon of separate spheres that distorts our understanding of the relationships between race, imperialism, and indigeneity that have so profoundly shaped the development of the U.S. nation-state. American Indian history remained invisible to my best mentors in African American studies; scholars of empire and colonialism gave short shrift to the importance of the history, development, and influence of “blackness” in the United States; those focusing on the repercussions of Indian conquest did not connect it to the simultaneous moves into the Pacific and Puerto Rico. And in each of these spheres of history and analysis, feminist scholars of color have struggled to show how gender and sexuality in the United States have shaped and been shaped by race, indigeneity, and empire.

A Genealogy of the Questions

Amy Kaplan’s 2003 presidential address to the American Studies Association, “Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today,” pointed out the amnesia around the history of U.S. invasions and interventions that is revealed in the responses to the current war on Iraq. My contribution to the collective project Native Feminisms without Apology makes Hawai‘i the locus for examining some of these commonplace erasures and distortions. My reflections are inspired by a passage from Toni Morrison’s essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken”:

I can’t help thinking that the question should never have been “Why am I, an Afro-American, absent from [the scope of American literature]?” It is not a particularly interesting query anyway. The spectacularly interesting question is “What intellectual feats had to be performed by the author or his critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence . . .? What are the strategies of escape from knowledge? Of willful oblivion?”1
My essay attempts to consider Morrison’s questions in a very different context in order to map out the multiple and overlapping strategies of erasure that have rendered Hawaiian women invisible, and to begin to think through sites of resistance to colonial amnesia.

**Conceptual Erasure: U.S. Colonialism Is Off the Intellectual Map**

Having been the only Hawaiian in almost every continental educational setting I had been in, I left my undergraduate education in Women’s studies at Yale, with its decidedly weak understanding of race and empire in the United States, to go to the University of California at Berkeley to study within the newly developing graduate program of Ethnic studies. In the late 1960s and early ’70s, Berkeley and San Francisco State University were important sites of pressure from students, faculty, and community members within and outside the university system who demanded that the histories of U.S. people of color be learned and taught, and who instituted ethnic studies programs and courses to that end. But in the new interdisciplinary and multiracial PhD program that grew out of that history, there was then, and I am fairly sure now, no curriculum that addressed Hawai’i, Pacific Islanders, or U.S. imperialism outside the continent as significant and foundational to understanding the development of the United States. While the paradigm of the “nation of immigrants” was disrupted by models of “internal colonialism,” within our coursework, the colonial history of the takeover of Guam, “American Samoa,” and the Hawaiian islands was absent. Throughout both my undergraduate and graduate education, all the knowledge I gained and shared about indigenous Hawai’i and other Pacific islands came through extracurricular research, political organizing, and community relationships. In my substantial teaching experience with many different kinds of students at elite private institutions, public universities, and community colleges on the continent, I have found most have never been taught anything about Hawai’i or its history.

**Spatial Erasure: U.S. Colonialism Is Off the Literal Map**

Revealingly, the military and intelligence communities seem to be the only U.S. institutions that demonstrate consistent recognition of the existence of U.S. territories and possessions. The online CIA World Fact Book is one of the few readily available sources that succinctly and comprehensively delineate the land under U.S. control and the dates that control was taken. Students
who are not from the islands who know anything about Puerto Rico, Guam, or American Samoa usually do so because they or their families have been in the military. The distortions of literal and figurative mapping are necessary for the self-mythologizing of the United States. The myth of a (mostly) empty North American continent waiting for (European) settlement and “development” is foundational to the origin story of the United States as a “nation of immigrants” developing an untamed wilderness. This continental origin story requires the denial of more than five hundred years of contrary facts beginning with the existence of millions of indigenous people inhabiting North America at the time of European contact and continuing through to the present with the struggles of more than 562 currently federally recognized tribal entities fighting to maintain their limited sovereignty and promised treaty rights in the context of complete public ignorance and complaints about their “special rights.”  

This continental origin story cannot encompass the U.S. imperial move into the Pacific and the uncomfortable question of how the fiftieth of the “united” states came to be located 2,500 miles away from its nearest neighbor.

**Racial Erasure: Race and the Erasure of Indigeneity**

Inextricable from this denial of both the existence and foundational significance of indigenous peoples to the development of the United States is the popular conception of race as paradigmatically black and white. In the absence of an understanding of colonialism as foundational to its identity, the U.S. self-construction as a “nation of immigrants” symbolically reconfigures slavery as involuntary immigration and, as such, the original racial sin of the nation. African Americans become symbolically indigenous while all other people of color are seen as potentially illegitimate and/or illegal “aliens.”  

In a black-white dichotomy, indigenous peoples disappear completely, always already vanishing. This “vanishing” is helped along by a racial system in the United States in which blackness is assumed to subsume any other ancestry on the one hand while indigeneity must be documented and quantified to exist on the other. The primary beneficiary of this ideological schema is a white-supremacist political system that historically benefited from expanding the class of people considered property, and restricting the class of people holding property rights through treaty agreements. But non-indigenous people of color benefit as well from a national amnesia about the origin of “American” land and the particular political obligations owed to indigenous peoples.
Political Erasure: What’s in a Name?

In the 1960s and ’70s, in the context of worldwide movements for decolonization, many U.S. people of color organized themselves under the rubric “Third World,” emphasizing a shared history and a political identity as colonized peoples. The depoliticized bureaucratization and marketing of “multiculturalism” and diversity that followed in the 1980s and ’90s solidified what I like to call the four food groups of contemporary U.S. racial discourse: Latino (Hispanic), black (African American), Native American, and Asian/Pacific Islander. Hawaiian women have occupied a shifting categorical terrain. Within federal bureaucracies and some community-based organizations, Hawaiians are classified as “Native American,” along with American Indians and Alaskan Natives, but are rarely addressed in Native American studies courses or by Native American community organizations.

Our most common (mis)classification, however, is as “Asian Pacific,” a category created by the U.S. Census Bureau that includes immigrant Asian women, and this has had the most serious repercussions of all for Hawaiian women’s political and cultural recognition. The conflation of the pan-ethnic category of Pacific Islanders and the pan-ethnic category of Asian American, as in terms such as “Asian and Pacific American” (APA) and “Asian and Pacific Islander” (API), has had severely detrimental effects on Pacific Islanders on the continent. The general lack of any knowledge about Pacific Islanders—whether Polynesian, Melanesian, or Micronesian—means that the construction of an “Asian Pacific” racial category in the United States has served to disguise the absence of Pacific Islanders in U.S. organizations. The tremendous disparity in the sizes of the groups, as well as among their demographic profiles, has meant that any statistics on “APA”/“API” populations have been useless at best and radically misleading at worst for gaining accurate information about Pacific Islanders.

Combating Erasure: Why Indigenous Feminism?

Most significantly for Hawaiian women, the common use of “API” functions to erase Hawaiian sovereignty as a pressing contemporary issue. Within the United States, “Asian American” is an immigrant-based category, and within its framework, Hawaiians’ indigenous identity disappears. Our deepest bond with American Indian women has been created through the shared struggle to support indigenous nationhood as the basis for the health and survival of our peoples. The importance of indigenous national sovereignty is a very difficult
concept to convey within a dominant society dedicated to the fetishization of individualism and deeply suspicious of group identities. In the United States the contemporary conception of race is firmly anchored in civil rights ideologies, the idea of equality of individuals within one nation, and does not address very different concepts of indigenous nationhood. The logics of some forms of antiracist struggles paradoxically can undermine group identities by advocating for a form of social justice based on the equal treatment of individuals. For this reason many indigenous women are wary of the lumping together of racialized groups of indigenous, immigrant, and enslaved origin in one homogeneous category, “people of color,” on the grounds that the specificity and particular rights of indigenous people disappear in the mix.

Combating Erasure: Why Indigenous Feminism?

For similar reasons many activist indigenous women are also suspicious of calls for solidarity on the basis of female identity and shared gender oppression across cultures. The disavowal of feminism by some is rooted in two very different but overlapping schools of thought. The first is that feminism is a discourse of white Western women that is really about their struggle to have equal status with white Western men, a status that still puts them into a superior position vis-à-vis everyone else. Sadly, skeptics can find many examples of self-identified feminist analysis to support this view. In the second critical view, feminism is seen as creating an artificial distinction between men and women that is inherently divisive to the strength of the “people” or nation as a whole. Proponents of this line of thinking do not consider Gloria Anzaldua’s response to the accusations of antifeminist cultural nationalists, “Not me sold out my people, but they, me.” What Anzaldua, the queer daughter of farmworker poverty, border-crossing and clashing, sexual, spiritual, and racial mestizaje meant by this is at the heart of the struggle for indigenous and other women of color to decolonize ourselves from all the elements that damage our lives, no matter what their origin.

Mana Wahine (Women’s Power): Hawaiian Women and Indigenous Feminism

At the time of European contact, Hawaiian women held significantly more power than their European counterparts did. Lilikala Kameʻelehiwa’s monograph Na Wahine Kapu (Divine Hawaiian Women) reveals that there were women chiefs as early as 1375, that both male and female gods had power
and prestige in the religious system, and that gender was not the deciding factor in the distribution of political and social power in pre-European contact Hawaiian society, where rank and lineage were the key determinants. Contrary to the annexationists’ proclamation of democracy triumphing over despotism, European and American colonization stripped political power and voting rights from Hawaiian women.

For Hawaiian women, the imposition of Christianity within the Western legal system forced their literal renaming with both “Christian names” and patrilineal surnames, and enforced monogamy and heterosexual marriage through the criminalization of sexual behavior. The view of missionary William Alexander that “licentiousness” was “the besetting sin of the people” and that Hawai‘i was “a sea of pollution” was common among the Calvinist interlopers. Sally Engle Merry’s groundbreaking Colonizing Hawai‘i: The Cultural Power of Law examines nineteenth-century court documents to demonstrate how “fornication” and “adultery” were defined and constructed as crimes. She notes that from the 1830s to the 1850s, fully 73 percent of the legal caseload for all the islands was composed of offenses related to sexual behavior, namely “adultery,” “lewdness,” and “seduction.”

These examples starkly reveal the gendered and sexualized forms colonialism takes that reconstitute both individual and communal indigenous identities in stigmatized and disempowering ways. Thus, feminist theory remains integral to the process of decolonization for Hawaiian and other indigenous women. Whatever the disagreements are about the nature of the precolonial status of women within various indigenous societies, there is no ambiguity about the negative consequences of the views and actions brought by European missionaries, soldiers, and settlers. The deliberate destruction of non-heteronormative and monogamous social relationships, the indigenous languages that could conceptualize these relationships, and the cultural practices that celebrated them has been inextricable from the simultaneous colonial expropriation of land and natural resources.

The reverberations of the past coexist with a thoroughly colonized present. Indigenous societies struggling to maintain cultural integrity and political sovereignty do not exist untouched and apart from the influence of a dominant culture whose deeply racist, sexist, and violent values are spread throughout the world through television, film, and advertising. Indigenous feminism grapples with the ways patriarchal colonialism has been internalized within indigenous communities as well as with analyzing the sexual and gendered nature of the process of colonization. The contemporary rates of sexual abuse, child abuse,
domestic violence, and all other less obviously gendered indicators of community health—drug use, incarceration rates, suicide, and so on—remain frighteningly high for indigenous communities and peoples. Native Hawaiian women have the highest rates of breast and lung cancer in Hawaii. A preliminary list of Hawaiian women’s gendered human rights needs includes freedom from domestic (and international!) violence, reproductive freedom, and access to education, health care, and employment.

Contemporary Hawaiian women face political struggles on multiple fronts. Because the political overthrow of the sovereign nation of Hawai‘i was accompanied by a “civilizing” mission that explicitly denigrated the culture, history, beliefs, and practices of the Hawaiian people, the project of decolonization is inherently multifaceted. It is at once intellectual, political, artistic, and spiritual, and the reclamation of the colonized body is at the center of the work. Material and spiritual safety are deeply intertwined. The feminist decolonization project seeks the integration of spiritual, psychological, and physical health or rather, the recognition that these elements cannot exist outside of their interrelation.

Because colonization relies on forced forgetting and erasure, the need to bring the past forward into our consciousnesses is ongoing. Reconstructing tradition and memory is a vital element of indigenous survival, and there is nothing simple or one-dimensional about the process of reconstruction. It is no coincidence that many of the Hawaiian women producing the most powerful decolonizing theory are also musicians, dancers, and/or language teachers—Lilikala Kame‘elehiwa, Noenoe Silva, Manulani Meyer, Leilani Basham, and Ku‘ualoha Ho‘omanawanui among them. They bring the past and present together in forms both inherited and innovative, encompassing ancestral knowledge and Western academic traditions. In a forthcoming, deeply moving book, Ancestry of Experience: A Journey into Hawaiian Ways of Knowing, theorist and dancer Leilani Holmes explores the embodiment and enactment of memory, the remembrance of history through multiple sources, including dreams and body memories. She, along with the others, reminds us that in Hawaiian metaphorical terms, we face forward toward the past; it does not lie behind us. Far from being inherently regressive, a call to reclaim tradition can open new/old ways of being.
Notes
2. In particular this includes the 1990s organizing and cultural work of J. Kēhaulani Kauanui; Sharon Nawahine Lum Ho; Paul Kealoha Blake of the East Bay Media Center; Hinano Compton; Teresia Teaiwa; Patrick Makuakāne, kumu hula of Nā Lei Hulu I Ka Wèkū; the Bay Area Pacific Islanders’ Cultural Association; the Hayward Hula Festival; the Ohana Cultural Center; and La Pena Cultural Center in Oakland, California.