

Book Review

From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i
By Haunani-Kay Trask
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Who is your mother and what story does she tell? What stories are important to the make-up, the traditions, of your family? Do you have a sense of identity within your own community? Is your community lost, swallowed up by progress, by capitalism, the almighty dollar? How do you identify with your own societal construct?

Defining identity and preserving local knowledge sits at the heart of the book that continues, ten years after its first printing, to being the authoritative history and recommendations for strategies in Native Hawaiian sovereignty movement. From A Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaii by University of Hawaii professor Dr. Haunani-Kay Trask, sets the standard for talks in and around the issues of self-determination, blood quantum, federal recognition, and – yes – sovereignty amongst Native Hawaiian peoples.

This book is germane in a discussion of citizen empowerment for it is the first one of its kind (and truly the only one since) that discusses both the perceptions of plight and strengths in Hawaii from a variety of perspectives. This book can appeal to the Native Hawaiian interested in strategies and guidelines preserving his or her own traditions, local knowledge, and finding themselves in a place where they can be agents of change or preservers of spirit. It can give perspective and encouragement to the Western researcher in development of ways to ask question without “becoming” a perceived oppressor. It can help revitalize a typically American perception that Hawaii is about a place to vacation, a strategic military location, or where aloha shirts come from; it can demonstrate the voice of one of its citizens speaking freely and energizing those whom wished to believe. It is a book that defines the very matriarchal construct from which many of our communities have evolved and gives us a blueprint for the way to preserve our own traditions and local knowledge. It is also guidelines for all people to know what is possible when one individual voice decides that it is time to no longer remaining a victim simply struggling to survive.

This book, in this form, is the best way to acknowledge, and honor, citizen empowerment because it is not wholly about one person's agenda. It takes information and translates it to local communities, global ideologies, and holistic ways of knowing and learning. It brings it [to what is “it” referring?] altogether. Can the depravity of human torture in some countries be analogous to the annexation of Hawaii? Can the Maori of New Zealand find common issues with a native Hawaiian living in Fresno, California? Can a small Indian nation on the verge of federal recognition identify with the “special status” many Hawaiians enjoy? This book is a template for change and none since can compare to its value.

In contemporary times, more and more women in Hawai'i are stepping up and sharing local knowledge within their respective communities; that knowledge helps to foster, help to grow, identity and power amongst those community. It is no wonder since Hawai'i, for all intents and purposes, Dr. Trask's book, holds vital knowledge and guidelines for up and coming generations to use build upon that community; citizen empowerment cannot only be defined by the Western model when the indigenous model from where grassroots movements, local communities, families, and traditions sprout ideas and carry on stories of old. "If it is truly our history Western historians desire to know, they must put down their books, and take up our practices: first of course, the language, but later, the people, the aina, the stories," Trask said. "Above all, in the end, the stories. Historians must listen; they must hear the connections, the reservoir of sounds and meanings. They must come, as American Indians suggested long ago, to understand the land. Not in the Western Way, but in the indigenous way, the way of living within and protecting the bond between people and aina. This bond is cultural, and it can be understood only culturally."

Dr. Trask's book put words onto paper – a Western method – of oral traditions and ways of knowing; if not, the specifics, but the spirit of those ways. Her individual voice and research and strategies are evocative of trying to blend communities steeped in oral narrative as a way of passing on knowledge with the more worldview of documenting that knowledge and preserving it amongst the book stacks of a library. At what point, does knowledge get lost, when the way a story is told is more important than the content of that story? Dr. Trask does a good job of remaining an academic and providing the constructs needed by the Western researcher as well as accommodating her own ways of learning: a difficult task indeed.

Tradition, family, spirit, and local knowledge are at the heart of defining the Native Hawaiian identity. That community can be found in the homesteads, in the ghettos, on the beaches, and at the table. Single individuals do not create the societal construct of the native Hawaiian identity; it is categorically widespread throughout the islands, the mainland United States and even around the world. From a Native Daughter is evocative of how change can happen when a voice is heard above the din with a willingness to preserve the spirit of old, the progress of new, and the identity of self.

Dr. Trask is not the only voice of native Hawaiian sovereignty, but her book is a model for citizen empowerment and change. For in this voice, we see our past. "I could not turn back the time for the political change, but there is still time to save our heritage. You must never to cease to act because you fear you may fail. The way to lose any earthly kingdom is to be inflexible, intolerant of too many wrongs and without judgment at all. It is a razor's edge, it is the width of pili grass." These words come not from Dr. Task, but Hawai'i's last monarch Queen Liliuokalani. With this book, Trask preserves a little bit more of Hawai'i, of the aina, and continues to create dialogue for future generations, just like the once favored queen.

About the Author:

Daniel W. Kana Shephard is a professional staff member, part-time instructor, and graduate student at The Evergreen State College. A former freelance stringer for mainstream and alternative press, he has switched his focus to ethnographic research in the area of local knowledge preservation in indigenous communities. He also pens an identity perspectives column for a popular community magazine.