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2017 Thomas D. Clark Student Writing Award Winning Essay

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**“HE HOU HAWAI‘I:
Polynesian Transformation in
the Face of the West” by
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Cultural subjugation is an intrinsic casualty of imperialism across the globe, from the suppression of the Celts by the Romans and Anglo-Saxons in the early first millennium to the infamous obliteration of Native American societies by migrating Europeans. The Polynesian islands as a whole were subject to a similar pressure from the West between the late eighteenth and twentieth centuries, and Hawai‘i in particular has been at the behest of the United States long before it became a state on August 21, 1959. From the period between its discovery and its statehood, and even into the twenty-first century, the native culture of Hawai‘i has experienced major shifts in response to the pressure of the ever-present West, the U.S. in particular. Westernism has bled into Hawai‘i in every sphere of its culture and lifestyle, causing stark changes in its political structures, its religious practices, and the culture of its people (including storytelling and theater). While Hawai‘i’s culture has shifted, however, it has emphasized new ideas and resurrecting old ones in attempt to subtly subvert the power of American colonialism. An analysis and comparison of Hawaiian culture before and after the dominating presence of the U.S. and the West can clarify what aspects carried over and survived Westernization, and whether these particular aspects survived because they did not interfere with the culture of the U.S. or because they directly opposed it.

Hawai‘i, initially settled by Polynesian populations from Asia in the first few centuries of the Common Era,¹ existed for many centuries away from the other domineering powers of the world. The only large culture it regularly interacted with was the rest of Polynesia, which could only barely be called a “major power” in the most lenient sense of the term. The arrival of James Cook, a British explorer, interrupted this existence in early 1778, during his third Pacific

¹ Ralph S. Kuykendall & A. Grove Day, *Hawaii: A History – From Polynesian Kingdom to American State* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1961), 5.

voyage.² This marked the beginning of interaction between Europe and the so-called “Sandwich Islands” – Hawai‘i’s independence as a sovereign kingdom would not be recognized until 1843.³ The United States was involved in Hawaiian affairs throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a fact proven by the continual presence of American officials.⁴ The influence of Western businessmen in the Kingdom of Hawai‘i eventually culminated a final coup d’état of Queen Lili‘uokalani and her retainers by a small group of nationalists in 1893.⁵ Though the United States under President Cleveland intended to restore Lili‘uokalani, the apparent discovery of a military force under her command in the same year led the American government to force her to abdicate her throne.⁶

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Hawai‘i was a territory of the United States. One of its great purposes for the U.S. was as a home for military bases to confront the Japanese and other Pacific threats, a fear realized by the Pearl Harbor bombing in 1941. During and after World War II, Hawai‘i came to be considered part of the United States beyond its territorial obligations, as it had experienced more trauma in the war than any other state, and the campaign for its statehood succeeded in 1959, the most recent formative date in Hawaiian history.

The scope and trajectory of Hawaiian history has had a major effect on the way its history has been told by future generations, but many sources have more or less vanished over the repeated course of interaction between Hawai‘i and the West. As far as primary sources go, they are incredibly difficult to come by because the Hawaiian language (*‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i*) was not put

² Kuykendall & Day, 14.

³ Kuykendall & Day, 64–75.

⁴ A fact suggested by correspondence during Abraham Lincoln’s term discussing the matter of commissioners in Hawai‘i.

⁵ Kuykendall & Day, 176–179.

⁶ Kuykendall & Day, 178–179.

into any written form until the early 1800s (when missionaries did for the Hawaiians what St. Cyril and St. Methodius did for the Slavs in the 800s and produced the first Bible in the local vernacular). This means that no written sources from Hawai'i exist prior to their interactions with the West. The earliest sources that could be consulted are writings from the West about the islands, such as James Cook's journals from his third voyage (1776–80), which contain the first mention of Hawai'i in any written form. Cook is quick to identify the Hawaiians as “of the same Nation as the people of Otahiete”⁷ and vaguely describes some of their rituals, even taking the liberty of renaming the islands, which he had been informed were “O'why'he,”⁸ the Sandwich Islands, “in honour of the Earl of Sandwich.”⁹ The details in Cook's account are frustratingly scarce and influenced by his uneducated status, making it impossible to grasp the reality and complexity of early Hawaiian society from his writings.

The closest that can be achieved in terms of primary Hawaiian sources are written forms of oral histories or Hawaiian interpretations of events. Though the latter might not technically be considered a secondary source, the direct connection between the Hawaiian people and their heritage gives a much closer look into that culture than the writings of any non-Hawaiian American. Unfortunately, these writings cannot quite escape Western influence, and even retellings of old Hawaiian oral histories suffer new biases determined on the situation of the speaker. One of the best collections of Hawaiian folktales is *The Legends of Myths of Hawaii*, written by the Hawaiian monarch Kalākaua in 1888, during his reign. Kalākaua was responsible for reviving many traditional Hawaiian practices that had been outlawed during the religious

⁷ James Cook, *The Journals* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 530. “Otahiete” is Cook's name for the island of Tahiti.

⁸ Cook, 594.

⁹ Cook, 537.

conversion led by Ka‘ahumanu (wife of Kamehameha I and Kuhina Nui¹⁰) and Kamehameha II in the early decades of the nineteenth century.¹¹ As such, it is not surprising that a book of old folk-tales would come from him. Another work by a Hawaiian monarch is *Hawaii’s Story by Hawaii’s Queen*, written by Lili‘uokalani in 1898. These works represent the first attempt by Hawaiians to collect Hawaiian culture in a written and lasting form in the hopes that it would survive the oncoming rush of Westernism.

The writings of Kalākaua and Lili‘uokalani represent the dying breaths of Hawai‘i’s native kingdom. Hawai‘i would become a literary presence once more after World War II, when the bombing of Pearl Harbor forced the question of the territory’s possible statehood to be addressed. Works on Hawai‘i created during this period, roughly between 1940 and 1970, convey the opinions of continental Americans (largely academics, possibly intrigued by a new world of history and politics) and represent the transference of authority in Hawaiian history from native Hawaiians to Western scholars – the most prominent authors on Hawai‘i in this period were distinctively not Hawaiian, such as A. Grove Day and Ralph S. Kuykendall, who hailed from Pennsylvania and California, respectively. These scholars took it upon themselves to familiarize Americans with Hawai‘i and its history and culture so that the question of statehood could be properly addressed. In their 1948 joint work *Hawaii: A History*, Day and Kuykendall make their objective in writing the book very clear, stating, “The present volume is designed to give the general reader the main narrative of Hawaii’s history . . . when Hawaii’s fight for statehood has made its history an issue of national importance.”¹² Another author during this period, W. Storrs Lee, wrote *The Islands* in 1966, after Hawai‘i achieved its statehood, and

¹⁰ A former office in the government of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i that acted much as a Prime Minister would, with similar responsibilities and powers.

¹¹ Kuykendall & Day, 40–41.

¹² Kuykendall & Day, v.

writes with sympathy towards the Hawaiian people, noting that James Cook's arrival disturbed an already-existing "social order" that had thrived in the area for many centuries.¹³ It's possible that Lee's sympathy comes from a feeling of commonality with the Hawaiians, as Hawai'i had become an American state between Grove and Day's work and Lee's (those who opposed its statehood surely would not have felt so warm towards it), although this is merely a possibility rather than proven fact.

It would not be until the late twentieth and early twenty-first century that Hawai'i's history and culture would become the property and responsibility of Hawaiians once again, largely as part of the "Hawaiian Renaissance" – described as a "renewed commitment to the preservation and promotion of kanaka maoli (Native Hawaiian) culture, history, and language."¹⁴ Authors such as Brandy Nālani McDougall (a Hawai'i native) and Diana Looser (an Australian¹⁵ professor with a focus on Oceania and Polynesia) have authored very in-depth examinations of Hawaiian social history and culture, finally completing a picture that has been largely ignored since Hawai'i's "discovery" by James Cook and the West. Many of these authors, in examining past and present Hawaiian culture, came to the conclusion that elements of modern Hawaiian culture have been maintained specifically as a subtle form of revolt against the United States; however, they only come to this conclusion in the sense of cultural works like stories and plays, while it seems to be a theme throughout every facet of Hawai'i and her people. If the period in the mid-twentieth century represented the seizing of Hawai'i by the West, the modern period

¹³ W. Storrs Lee, *The Islands* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 5.

¹⁴ Diana Looser, "'Our Ancestors That We Carry on Our Backs': Restaging Hawaii's History in the Plays of Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl," *The Contemporary Pacific* 23, no. 1 (2011), 73.

¹⁵ Though not exactly native Hawaiian, Australia was also claimed by James Cook and put through many of the same colonial processes as Hawai'i, so it could be considered part of a "greater Polynesia" of sorts.

represents its reclamation by a transnational¹⁶ Hawai‘i and a rededication to the complexities of its people independent of the United States and even of greater Polynesia.

The theme of Hawai‘i’s identity being seized by the West and, eventually, partly restored is common in almost every facet of Hawaiian culture. One major respect in which they never regained any footing, however, is in their political system. The early government structures in Hawai‘i are similar to those that emerged in small tribes across the globe, and, through most of the first and some of the second millennium, each Hawaiian island was more or less independent and ruled by small-time chiefs (or *ali‘i*).¹⁷ By the eighteenth century, “little kingdoms existed on all the major islands.”¹⁸ This tribal patchwork, similar to that of the northern Native Americans, the medieval European barbarians, or the many tribes of Africa, continued to exist (with occasional permutations) from the initial settling of the islands in the second or third century up until the arrival of James Cook, a point that also marks the beginning of what could be considered the “second phase” of Hawaiian politics.

Shortly after Cook’s death at the hands of the Hawaiians, one of the *ali‘i*, a prince named Kamehameha, began to utilize European weapons in his struggles against the *ali‘i* of the other significant islands.¹⁹ The following period of civil war was exceedingly violent, reminiscent of the Warring States period in Japan, another Pacific island. As Kamehameha began conquering islands, he installed governors, one of which was John Young, a British military commander left behind by the crew of the *Eleanora*.²⁰ By around 1800, he had set his capital on the island of Hawai‘i, at Kailua, and finally gained the submission of Kaumuali‘i, king of Kauai and the last

¹⁶ That is to say, a Hawai‘i integrated into a global community.

¹⁷ Kuykendall & Day, 6–8.

¹⁸ Lee, 10.

¹⁹ A. Grove Day, *Hawaii: Fiftieth Star* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1961), 32–33.

²⁰ Kuykendall & Day, 27–28.

independent Hawaiian monarch, in 1810.²¹ With this, Kamehameha founded the first full kingdom of Hawai‘i, the same kingdom that Lili‘uokalani would lose in 1893. When it is claimed that Hawai‘i must be given its own independent state back, this is usually the sovereign body they’re referring to; however, this kingdom was only brought together by Kamehameha through the use of European supplies and technology. Would the “purest” form of Hawai‘i not be the patchwork of tribes that had existed for more than a millennium? The main difference seems to be that, while the transition of Hawai‘i from tribes to a kingdom appears to be an evolution of an already-existing structure, Hawai‘i’s eventual adoption into the United States did a lot to overwrite the existing system and institute a brand-new one.

The days of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i were mired by Western influence. England, France, the United States, and even Russia at different times tried to manipulate Kamehameha’s kingdom – in one notable instance, a Russian voyage led by the German physician Georg Anton Scheffer attempted to convince Kaumuali‘i around 1816 to renege on his submission to Kamehameha and become independent, in the hopes that Russia would gain trade power in Kauai.²² Hawai‘i was an incredibly significant trading post in the nineteenth century, so foreign attempts to manipulate it are unsurprising. The United States possessed considerable interest in Hawai‘i, and the behavior of the local American commissioner was a concern of the president himself.²³ A more recent view states that American influence in Hawai‘i consisted, in large part, of a form of “neocolonialism” that used debt as a way to subdue a supposedly independent nation,²⁴ and, though Hawai‘i gained nominal independence from the United States, France, and England in 1842–3, this economic conversion would continue to populate Hawai‘i with *haoles* (foreigners)

²¹ Kuykendall & Day, 29.

²² Kuykendall & Day, 36–37.

²³ Gregg to Abraham Lincoln, 24 January 1863, in the Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress.

²⁴ Mark Rifkin, “Debt and the Transnationalization of Hawai‘i,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2008), 42–43.

until they began to outnumber the local *kanakas* (a name for the native Hawaiians). Perhaps it was the weakened state that the United States put Hawai‘i into that caused many, including Sanford B. Dole and his group of annexationists, to believe that Hawai‘i would inevitably have to become American to survive;²⁵ regardless, the economic and political pressures put on Hawai‘i by the U.S. and the other powers of the West brought the kingdom to a point where it took only a day for Dole to overthrow Lili‘uokalani and raise the American flag over the islands.²⁶ As a modern state, Hawai‘i enjoys benefits of protection and economic integration, but its old system has been practically obliterated. Perhaps the institution of a monarch to serve as governor, or even the installation of the royal dynasty as figurehead rulers with a form of administrator (possibly even a Kuhina Nui) to function as a governor, would allow for Hawai‘i to function within the United States without losing its connections to its political heritage.²⁷

Though forceful democratization is one of the main exports of the modern West, Hawai‘i was also visited by a much older export: Christianity. As Lee wrote in 1966 of the approaching missionaries to Hawai‘i:

To a God-fearing New Englander, anyone anywhere not living in the Puritan image was a little wicked. The Pacific islanders, who had never heard of the Puritans, were, therefore, very wicked indeed. But the gap in the enlightenment of these infidels was about to be closed. The Connecticut missionaries were coming.²⁸

The religion that Christianity would rush in to replace was very much like the early naturalistic religions that could be found across the world in older times. The core of the Hawaiian pantheon

²⁵ Day, 148–149.

²⁶ Day, 149–150.

²⁷ Independence is occasionally called for, but Hawai‘i could not survive as an independent nation in the modern world. Other island nations like the American Samoa, Micronesia, or the Caribbean islands all function within greater frameworks, either as territories (in the case of the Samoa) or as protectorates of the United Kingdom within the Commonwealth. Hawai‘i could revert to a status like this, but that only seems like a step backward at this point; at least they have a voice and a vote in the United States at present.

²⁸ Lee, 55.

derived from Polynesian religion, and focused on Kane (god of life and light), Lono (god of agriculture and weather), Ku (god of war), and Kanaloa (god of the afterlife in Hawai‘i, though a more powerful god of the sea in other Polynesian cultures).²⁹ In Hawai‘i, another powerful deity was Pele, goddess of the volcanoes and an extraordinarily prominent presence, all the more notable for her being female in a world of male gods – this could be considered an early expression of womanly power, *mana wahine*. Like in other cultures embracing divine right, characteristics of the *ali‘i* were sometimes prescribed to these deities.³⁰ The natives would celebrate the gods through surfing, dancing (primarily the hula), gambling, and general merrymaking,³¹ and, as Kuykendall and Day wrote, “Every important activity, from making a house or a canoe to planning a battle, had to be started with a religious ceremony.”³²

The gods were prominent in storytelling and in daily life. Such tales as the *mo‘olelo* of Hi‘iakaikapoliopole and those related by Kalākaua are almost all centered around religious figures, to the point that attacking or erasing those deities would be to attack or erase Hawaiian culture itself. Notably, though Kamehameha used European strategies and technology to conquer the Hawaiian Islands, he held firm the old religion, and various points in the tale of his conquests suggest the ever-present influence of religion. Take, for instance, the eruption of the volcano of Kilauea in 1790, which he believed to be a sign that Pele supported him in war,³³ or how Kamehameha had his rival *ali‘i*, Keōua Kū‘ahu‘ula, sacrificed on an altar of Ku, the god of war, to mark his defeat.³⁴ To Western eyes, the religious practices and customs of the *kanakas* were bizarre and absurd. Writing on his interactions with local religious leaders, Cook notes in his

²⁹ Lee, 20.

³⁰ Lee, 20.

³¹ Lee, 21.

³² Kuykendall & Day, 10.

³³ Kuykendall & Day, 25.

³⁴ Day, 38.

journals his greeting by a local priest he calls *Tou-ah-ah*, describing how the priest presented Cook with “a piece of red cloth which he wrapped [sic] round me,” adding that “in this manner all or most of the chiefs or people of Note introduce themselves.”³⁵ Cook had the benefit of experiencing other Polynesian cultures such as those on Fiji or Tahiti, hence his muted reaction. Later populations would not, and the arrival of Hawaiians in New England (being transplanted by sailing crews they had joined) scared evangelical Christians into turning their focus to the Hawaiian Islands and the native Hawaiians.³⁶

Schools such as the “Foreign Mission School for the Sons of Unevangelized Barbarians” in Connecticut were opened in New England to deal with the *kanakas* that had been moved to that region, while the first onslaught of missionaries arrived at Kohala in 1820.³⁷ As the support of Europe became more necessary, the old practices were abandoned; around 1819, Kamehameha II, urged on by his father’s wife, Ka‘ahumanu, overturned the old *kapu* system of religious law and, to show his dedication, engaged in *ai noa* (the formerly illegal act of eating with women) and destroyed idols and places of worship (*heiaus*).³⁸ The Hawaiians wanted the benefits missionaries brought of education and writing, and were willing to accept their ways as well so long as those benefits were achieved.³⁹ Missionaries constructed churches across the islands and Ka‘ahumanu began to seriously promote Christianizing in 1824,⁴⁰ creating a Hawai‘i much more agreeable to the rest of the West than the one Kamehameha II had inherited.

Many of the practices that Kamehameha II abolished with the *kapu* would remain illegal until the late 1800s, under the reign of Kalākaua. During his reign, he made efforts to restore

³⁵ Cook, 605.

³⁶ Lee, 58.

³⁷ Lee, 60–61.

³⁸ Kuykendall & Day, 40–41.

³⁹ Kuykendall & Day, 45.

⁴⁰ Kuykendall & Day, 46.

“traditional Hawaiian culture” against the whim of Europeans who thought that he would plunge Hawai‘i back into tribal paganism.⁴¹ Kalākaua wanted to bring Hawai‘i back to its glory days under Kamehameha I, seeking both to bring back its suppressed culture and to make it, along with the rest of Polynesia, a powerful political unit.⁴² Though this latter goal would not be met, the former can be said to have been met. In the twenty-first century, ancient practices like hula can still be seen very active and alive, and Hawaiian storytelling remains compelling and accessible. Were it not for Kalākaua, Hawai‘i may well have sunk into assimilation along with the rest of the United States – its unique cultural expressions today may only be visible because he attempted to halt the push of the West.

Much of the revival that Kalākaua pulled off in the 1880s can be seen in the twenty-first century in the form of folk-tales, songs, and theater. Themes present within these art forms suggest that Hawai‘i has not fully accepted its subjugation, and is promulgating these themes as a subtle way of rebellion against the pressure of Western culture. The theme of *mana wahine* or womanly power, previously mentioned in connection with Pele, is one such theme, seen by twenty-first-century writers as a challenge to the patriarchal society of the West. This theme is prominent in the story of Hi‘iakaikapoliopole, a tale Brandy Nālani McDougall describes as a *mo‘olelo* (a type of story that combines historical and mythological elements).⁴³ Hi‘iakaikapoliopole is a sister of Pele, who sends her to retrieve her lover, Lohi‘au, an *ali‘i*. Along her journey, Hi‘iakaikapoliopole confronts many adversaries (notably male) and defeats them in various ways that show her dominance over men in such areas as humor and cleverness. The *mo‘olelo* has been recently interpreted to be extolling the superiority of women over men, as

⁴¹ Kalakaua, *The Legends and Myths of Hawaii: The Fables and Folk-Lore of a Strange People* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1972), 3.

⁴² Kalakaua, 5.

⁴³ Brandy Nālani McDougall, “Wondering and Laughing With Our Ancestors: Mana Wahine and the Mo‘olelo of Hi‘iakaikapoliopole,” *Marvels & Tales* 30, no. 1 (2016), 25–26.

both Hi‘iakaikapoliopole and Pele are shown to be incredibly powerful and dominant over all other characters in the *mo‘olelo*.⁴⁴ Also in the *mo‘olelo* are a number of homosexual encounters between Hi‘iakaikapoliopole and other women, a further affront to the “heteronormative” culture of the West.⁴⁵

These concepts, challenging the structure of Western relationships and gender relations, are not simply modern constructs retroactively placed on Hawaiian folk-legend; the stories presented by Kalākaua in 1888 carry similar themes. “The Apotheosis of Pele” is the most obvious comparison, since it too portrays both Pele and, in a much more limited role, Hi‘iakaikapoliopole (here named *Hiiaka-ika-pali-o-pele*, who appears as an insignificant background character). It is described that Pele had participated in wars waged by her father,⁴⁶ creating a militant female archetype whose only real comparison in the West might be Jeanne d’Arc. Of course, not all women Kalākaua portrays are so strong: in “Kaala, the Flower of Lanai,” the titular Kaala is treated as little more than a plot device⁴⁷ – one must wonder, however, if this is due to Hawaiian culture or to Kalākaua’s attempt to appeal to the West. Regardless, it is clear that the element of *mana wahine* once present in old Hawaiian tales has resurfaced in a much stronger way, seemingly as an attempt to emphasize the cultural differences between Hawai‘i and the West (hence why elements that are similar between the two have been more or less abandoned).

In theater, too, Hawai‘i has been experiencing a cultural resurgence. The plays of the modern Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl fall within a greater movement in the Pacific Islands to reclaim what is perceived to have been a “lost” heritage (as stated by Diana Looser), and

⁴⁴ McDougall, 28–29.

⁴⁵ McDougall, 28.

⁴⁶ Kalakaua, 141.

⁴⁷ Kalakaua, 411–427.

portrays in her plays historical events with elements of fiction (much in the vein of a *mo'olelo*). One of her better-known plays, *The Conversion of Ka'ahumanu*, was first performed in 1988 and dealt with the topic of Ka'ahumanu's destruction of *kapu* and support of Christian missionaries. *The Conversion of Ka'ahumanu* is made up of an entirely female cast, echoing ideas of *mana wahine* present in the *mo'olelo* of Hi'iakaikapoliopole. Looser described the play as dichotomous, presenting the conflict between "Hawaiian and foreigner, old and new."⁴⁸ The play works to depict how Ka'ahumanu manipulated religion for political benefits, as well as how pressures from the missionaries affected *kanakas*, a dual illustration of both the skill of Hawaiian leaders and of the sufferings Hawaiians endured at the hand of the West.⁴⁹ Another of Kneubuhl's plays, *Ola Nā Iwi*, focuses on the "repatriation and reburial" of *kanaka* remains, which hold religious significance in Hawai'i.⁵⁰ The protagonist in *Ola Nā Iwi* is female, again suggesting a connection to *mana wahine*, and the metaphor of reclaiming Hawaiian identity, both in the case of *Ola Nā Iwi* and the Hawaiian Renaissance, is immediately apparent.⁵¹ The importance of *mana wahine* in these stories depends on interpretation, but it is possible that the woman, as a minority, represents Hawai'i (a minority in the American sense); perhaps male opponents represent a patriarchic view of the West (although it should be noted that Hawaiian culture was just as male-focused as the West before the two cultures met), and the success of the woman is meant to suggest the success of Hawai'i. In this light, Kneubuhl's plays represent Hawai'i's attempts to reclaim its history, much like it's done in literature, and to tell its story without the filter of the West.

⁴⁸ Looser, 78–79.

⁴⁹ Looser, 80.

⁵⁰ Looser, 86–87.

⁵¹ Looser, 86.

Though Hawai‘i possesses a long history of independence, the continuing period of Western influence is composed of colonial, neocolonial, and postcolonial politics and influences. The West has taken practically everything from it: its political system, its religion, and its culture have all suffered drastically. Those suppressions have only been challenged in recent times with the spirit of rebirth sweeping Polynesia since the 1970s, and, while visible unrest is still absent, Hawaiians are uniting themselves through culture and unique practices to reform a cultural identity all their own. Moving forward, the United States can either choose to allow this new culture to flourish, or to once again challenge the native Hawaiian order – unfortunately, it may not survive another cycle of repression and alteration. Smaller cultures are frequently subsumed by greater entities throughout history, but the attempt to preserve those cultures in some way is not vain. Hawai‘i does not have to be either American or Hawaiian, but can embrace both, and its culture can flourish within the American system that, by all understandings of the founding and the Constitution, should be promoting and securing diversity of this very nature.

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