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Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism And The Politics Of Sovereignty And Indigeneity (Narrating Native Histories)



Synopsis

In the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act (HHCA) of 1921, the U.S. Congress defined a native Hawaiians as those people who with at least one-half blood quantum of individuals inhabiting the Hawaiian Islands prior to 1778. This blood logic has since become an entrenched part of the legal system in Hawai'i. Hawaiian Blood is the first comprehensive history and analysis of this federal law that equates Hawaiian cultural identity with a quantifiable amount of blood. J. Kā'aulani Kauanui explains how blood quantum classification emerged as a way to undermine Native Hawaiian (Kanaka Maoli) sovereignty. Within the framework of the 50-percent rule, intermarriage dilutes the number of state-recognized Native Hawaiians. Thus, rather than support Native claims to the Hawaiian islands, blood quantum reduces Hawaiians to a racial minority, reinforcing a system of white racial privilege bound to property ownership. Kauanui provides an impassioned assessment of how the arbitrary correlation of ancestry and race imposed by the U.S. government on the indigenous people of Hawai'i has had far-reaching legal and cultural effects. With the HHCA, the federal government explicitly limited the number of Hawaiians included in land provisions, and it recast Hawaiians' land claims in terms of colonial welfare rather than collective entitlement. Moreover, the exclusionary logic of blood quantum has profoundly affected cultural definitions of indigeneity by undermining more inclusive Kanaka Maoli notions of kinship and belonging. Kauanui also addresses the ongoing significance of the 50-percent rule: Its criteria underlie recent court decisions that have subverted the Hawaiian sovereignty movement and brought to the fore charged questions about who counts as Hawaiian.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Hawaiian Blood is the most timely book I have read this year. As of early 2009, the legislative and judicial branches of the U.S. federal government are poised to address issues directly relevant to questions of Hawaiian identity and sovereignty. The so-called Akaka bill and the "ceded lands" dispute currently before the Supreme Court are the latest manifestations of a protracted struggle over Hawaiian identities, rights, and autonomy. Kauanui's eloquent book provides an invaluable historical analysis of this history, with particular attention to the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act of 1921. Exploring the background of the law, Kauanui illustrates the politically-fraught and often chilling ways Hawaiian identities were reduced to an arbitrary calculus of blood quantum. Kauanui argues convincingly that the legislative process and the blood politics it engendered were principally fueled by non-native real estate interests. The subsequent history of blood quantification in the service of land dispossession has had lasting and compounding relevance in a variety of consequential and frequently detrimental ways for Native Hawaiians. Indeed, one cannot adequately understand the range and diversity of political issues and sovereignty movements in contemporary Hawai'i without studying the fractured and fracturing history of colonization and the legal machinery through which Hawaiian land and political autonomy were usurped. Kauanui is a clear and analytically-focused guide through this complex terrain. Beyond her keen historical work, which entails careful readings of legislative histories, Kauanui pushes readers to re-imagine the past and future of Hawaiian identity.

J. KÄ“haulani Kauanui, currently an associate professor of Anthropology and American Studies at Wesleyan University, has had numerous essays published in various books including *Recognition, Sovereignty Struggles, and Indigenous Rights in the United States: A Sourcebook*; *Decolonizing Native Histories*; and *Beyond the Frame: Women of Color and Visual Representation*. In this, her first book, she pulls no punches in her analysis of the American empire and how it has operated in Hawaii. She argues that blood quantum racial classification is used as a proxy for ancestry, with destructive political consequences for indigenous peoples. Her primary focus being on the legal construction of Hawaiian indigeneity in order to analyze the implications for historical claims to land and sovereignty, an argument she more than backs up. While the book revolves around the passage of the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act of 1920, chapter one serves as context, contrasting how

Hawaiians use genealogy to determine if one is Hawaiian as opposed to the “blood quantum” method devised by the law. As the author notes, the blood quantum method is designed to displace the indigenous form of identification.³⁸ Furthermore, she notes that genealogy plays a crucial role in Hawaiian political representation, which would account for why the U.S. government did (and continues to do) everything it can to discredit this and come up with an alternate method of determining who is and is not Hawaiian.⁶³ Chapter two also serves to contextualize the HHCA by discussing issues of depopulation, rehabilitation, and land entitlement, as well as those of race, indigeneity, and citizenship.

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