

The Hidden History of the African Diaspora in Hawai'i

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My intention in putting up this picture is not to claim, as some Afrocentric scholars do with the Americas, that Polynesian people are actually Black folk in disguise. I will also not contend here that there was prehistoric contact between peoples of African heritage and Pacific Island peoples, although one could construct such an argument based on a considerable amount of prehistoric and historic evidence. My goal in this talk is to briefly outline the role of African descended peoples in the post-contact history of the Hawaiian archipelago and some other selected places in the Pacific. The existence of such a history may come as a surprise; but recent scholarship in African and African-American studies, especially over the past ten years or so, is demonstrating clearly that the European and American colonization of the Pacific was a far more intricate and interesting undertaking than is commonly acknowledged. Thus when I speak of a “hidden history” I am talking about those (frequently concealed) events in the historical record that are overlooked, studiously ignored, or just plain forgotten. Moreover, if one believes that it is the role of history to not only shed light on the past, but to help explain the present and inform the future, then an examination of race relations in today's Hawai'i must invariably begin with a fuller historical understanding and appreciation for the very complex nature and evolution of Hawaiian-ness.

The history of the Black presence in Hawai'i can be summarized as follows. We know that Blacks were crewmembers of Cook's second and third Pacific voyages—Cook's cabin boy on the third voyage, in fact, was given the opportunity thirty years later to prove his navigational prowess to George Crowninshield, then captain of the famous Salem, MA built yacht *Cleopatra's Barge*, in Genoa, Italy. Crowninshield and his astronomer were rather impressed that a cook should not only be familiar with the work of Makelyne, Lyons, Witchel, and Bowditch, but was also keeping a private log-book in which he worked out his own navigational

calculations (Alexander 1906: 26-27). Although I have not yet checked the French sources, it is likely that Blacks were exploration and colonization crewmembers of ships led by such noted Frenchmen as Bougainville, Surville (1769-70 to New Zealand, just missing Cook), Marion Dufresne (who was a noted slave trader), and D'Urville. I should also note that there is a recurring reference in the literature to the possibility that Spanish Manila Galleons either deliberately or accidentally stopped off in Hawai'i, in which case there is a high likelihood that Blacks were members of those crews.

We can say that there is a "high likelihood" for the presence of Blacks onboard all of these trips for several reasons. The most direct lines of evidence, obviously, are crew lists and voyage accounts, both official and non-official. We must also, however, consider the context of the time. By the mid to late eighteenth century, the transatlantic slave trade was already over three centuries old. The triangular system which brought millions of enslaved Africans to the New World and which forged a new Black Atlantic maritime system and culture had placed Europeans, Indigenous Peoples, and Africans into greater contact than ever before. By the time Europe was ready to tackle the last unexplored ocean, free and unfree Blacks had been serving onboard these ships in a variety of capacities. We know of this from the vivid details provided in the famous slave narratives of emancipated slaves such as Olaudah Equiano as well as from the narratives of former slave ship captains who later repented.

After the consolidation of the islands and the establishment of the Hawaiian Kingdom by Kamehameha I, several Blacks are noted as living in Hawai'i at the time. A discussion of the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century African-American presence in Hawai'i usually starts with Anthony D. Allen (Hawaiian Name: Alani), a fugitive slave from Schenectady, New York, who was able to escape to freedom in Massachusetts¹ around 1800. Boston was a vibrant port during the early nineteenth century, and as Bolster (1997: 235-239) has shown, Blacks often constituted more than 25% of shipboard crews in various cities along the Eastern Seaboard,

¹New York did not pass a law outlawing slavery until 1799, whereas Massachusetts did so in the early 1780's (Scruggs 1992: 57). Nonetheless, although slavery was illegal, it was also illegal for any Black person to "tarry longer than two months" in the Commonwealth, according to a law passed in 1788. Thus Boston was hardly a paradise for Blacks during these years.

especially in cities such as Providence, New York, and Philadelphia. After working and travelling extensively as a sailor, Allen worked as a steward to King Kamehameha upon first arriving in the Hawaiian Islands in around 1810, and received a land grant in 1811. In 1812 he retired from the sea and lived in Hawai'i with his family until his death in 1835.

Another noteworthy African-American in Hawai'i during these years was Betsey Stockton, who accompanied a contingent of missionaries here in 1823. Stockton was an emancipated slave whose benefactor was Charles Stewart, a New Jersey clergyman. Upon arrival in Hawai'i, she is noted in accounts as playing an important missionizing role, and after learning the Hawaiian language, she taught English to the indigenous population on Maui.

Another frequently unrecognized political development in the Black Atlantic which influenced Hawai'i (and probably resulted in Blacks coming to Hawai'i) was the series of Caribbean and Latin American revolutions that were taking place during the early nineteenth century.² Haitian, Peruvian, and Mexican independence and the politics upon which they were based, for instance, had profound effects not just in those places and but upon culture and politics in Europe as well. They had a variety of effects on competing British and French imperial claims in the Pacific, from re-theorizations of proper colonial administration techniques to bizarre attempts by scholars to describe Pacific Islanders in terms of the "Indian" image with which Europeans had long been familiar. Many of the participants in these insurrectionary intrigues were of African descent and also participated in the piracy and privateering (which usually involved various degrees of slave trading) with which their activities were funded.

But the in many ways most interesting and maritime historical contingent of Blacks to arrive in Hawai'i during the early to mid nineteenth century were crewmembers aboard whaling ships. Thanks to the work of Jeff Bolster and others, we now know the truly multiracial composition of these crews; some of the crews, in fact, were majority Black or even all-Black. Moreover, the Black population onboard these ships themselves was diverse: many were American born Africans (second, third or fourth generation), and a great component were

²The Spanish Crown sent ships from Peru to Easter Island in 1770 and also sent some Franciscan Monks to Tahiti in 1772-75.

Portuguese Creole speaking populations from Cape Verde, the Azores, or elsewhere in the Portuguese speaking Black Atlantic. Between about 1820 and 1880 hundreds of whaling ships annually pulled into (primarily) Honolulu and Lahaina,³ and a significant number of Blacks stayed behind in the islands and became permanent residents where they worked as

cooks, barbers, tailors, sailors on interisland vessels, and members of musical groups. Four Blacks formed a royal brass band for Kamehameha III in 1834, and another Black, George W. Hyatt⁴, organized a larger band in 1845. Marriages occurred with Hawaiians and these people and their children became classified in censuses as Portuguese or Part-Hawaiian (Nordyke 1988: 243)

which is one major reasons why the precise population of Blacks in Hawai'i is so difficult to pinpoint with accuracy.

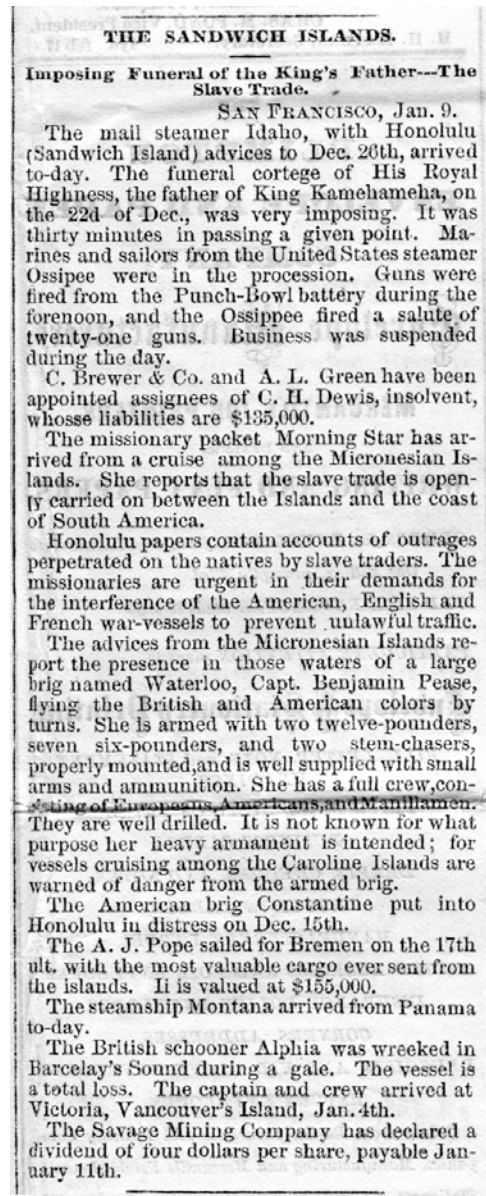
Blacks were not considered suitable as contract labor by Hawaiian Kingdom officials during the early plantation period. Work on sugar plantations was considered to be too close to slavery by most of the influential missionaries and their associates, a great number of whom were members of or acquainted with New England abolitionist societies. Most of the local New England oligarchy supported the North during the American Civil War, and migration to Hawai'i was very small during the 1870's and 1880's as increasing numbers of Blacks were disenfranchised from the seafaring way of life by incoming immigrant populations, and by the institutionalization of Jim Crow after the end of Reconstruction. As the following article in the Connecticut Press indicates, however, missionaries could be very vigilant in pointing out the ethical deficiencies in others, particular regarding the slave trade, while maintaining stereotyped and racist attitudes towards Hawaiians. This is not much of a contradiction; most abolitionists also held racist attitudes toward Blacks and did not think that they were capable of self-

³Right whales in prodigious numbers were discovered off the Pacific coast of South America, and by 1840 had been hunted almost to extinction. (GME: Whaling).

⁴George Washington Hyatt became the Band's second Bandmaster in 1845. Born in 1815 in Petersburg, Virginia, Hyatt was a former slave who had escaped and made his way to Hawai'i. He had been a member of the original Band under Oliver [the original leader of the King's Band, also an African-American], playing both the flute and the clarinet" (Bandy 1990: 70).

government either. In fact, during the Texas Revolution the same newspapers produced headlines which informed readers about the evils of “Slavery in Texas.” They were not referring to Negro slavery, of course, but the slavery of Anglo colonists who were suffering under the yoke of that oppressive dictator Santa Anna. We could have a long talk about the psychology of slaveholders claiming to be themselves enslaved, but what I find additionally interesting is the existence of a Pacific slave trade that was a continuance of the previously existing Atlantic system, and the role this played in the competing politics of colonization. For instance the British, as elsewhere, were very vigilant in observing and recording supposed French slave trading abuses in New Caledonia (a French penal colony for forty years) and elsewhere, while simultaneously engaging in brutal colonial repression in New Zealand, India, China, and on the African continent.⁵

The next significant influx of Blacks into Hawai’i involved the migration of first Portuguese and later Puerto Rican contract laborers to work on sugar plantations. As before, a significant portion of the Portuguese contract labor force was of African ancestry, but became absorbed into the evolving “local” culture and is not reflected in census records. Puerto Ricans were first recruited to Hawai’i in 1901 by the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association (HSPA) and several factors were behind the migration. Firstly, Puerto Rico, like Hawai’i was a new American colonial possession, so planters did not have to deal with the inconvenience of foreign ambassadors or



⁵Copies of British Embassy reports in New Caledonia and Mauritius—along with their condemnation of French slave trading—are on microfiche at the University of Hawai’i library.

plenipotentiaries concerned about mistreatment of their nationals. This had been a problem for the Hawaiian planter oligarchy which was concerned about controlling its largely mistreated and underpaid majority Japanese workforce, and also formed a strategic cornerstone of the pro-expansionist propaganda attack in Washington D.C. spearheaded by Theodore Roosevelt, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Henry Cabot Lodge, and others. Another factor that greatly influenced Puerto Rican migration was the disastrous hurricane *San Ciriaco* of August 8, 1899 which killed almost 3,400 people and caused more destruction than all previous *Boricua* hurricanes combined (Souza 1984: 160).

Some Blacks stopped off in Hawai'i on their way to fight in the Philippine War, where several of them, after hearing white American soldiers referring to Filipino resistance fighters as “niggers” and similar names, switched sides and fought along the side of Emiliano Aguinaldo and his nationalist forces.⁶ After the end of that war—by which time Hawai'i had become a U.S. territory—Blacks began to be stationed in Hawai'i as part of the military presence that persists to the present. In 1913, for instance, the 25th Infantry Regiment served in Hawai'i (Nordyke 1988: 245). The population remained relatively stable until the Second World War and has been increasing steadily since, nearly doubling every ten years or so.

Conclusion

The historical themes discussed in this paper give rise to some interesting questions. Before I pose them, I would like to summarize my two major points. First and perhaps foremost is my contention that the cultural geography of European exploration and colonization—and ultimately of race—in the Pacific (and everywhere) needs to be rethought, in a manner similar to the way identity and geography largely have been rethought in the Atlantic maritime world to produce a deliberately cross-cultural and trans-national Black identity and culture picture. While it may be appropriate to view the colonization of the Pacific as a matter of imperial contestation between (primarily) England and France—at least from a Eurocentric standpoint—it should also

⁶Perhaps the most famous of them was David Fagan of the 24th infantry who “accepted a commission in the insurgent army and for two years wreaked havoc upon the American forces” according to Willard Gatewood in his book *Smoked Yankees and the Struggle for Empire*.

be recognized that the project of Pacific empire was a decidedly ambivalent undertaking for those people of color looking to escape imperialist oppression in their own countries. While it might be awkward and inappropriate to talk about a “Black Pacific” based upon the rather limited history I have sketched out here, it cannot be denied that by the mid to late eighteenth century the Black Atlantic world (Gilroy 1993) was already in contact with and influencing (and being influenced by) the Pacific world.⁷ These ethnohistorical interactions further complicate an already sophisticated and intricate socioeconomic, political, and cultural conjuncture the effects of which are still being acutely felt. Secondly, the complicated identity picture that has been produced in modern Hawai’i has significant ramifications for theorists and practitioners interested in the meaning of twenty-first century multiracial democracy and liberation. Needless to say, this complicated history also bears strongly on some of the more nationalist claims of certain sectors of the Hawaiian Sovereignty movement and on Indigenism generally. The potential list of questions is practically endless: How can a multiplicity of identities be incorporated into a nationalizing politics? Is identity still a valid category of social analysis? Should it be? Does the fact that Blacks in Hawai’i were to a large part assimilated into “local” and/or “Hawaiian” culture over the years indicate that the category of “Blackness” is more fragile and not as powerful as is often suggested? What historical role has Blackness played in Hawaiian culture and what role do Black themes (music, fashion, language, etc.) play in the culture today? What meaning does “Blackness” hold in today’s Hawai’i, and why does anti-Black racism persist in the ostensibly most integrated and racially liberal state in the U.S.?

Obviously the answers to some of these questions await further analysis and discussion. But they remain central and enduring concerns and have far-ranging implications for the future. When W.E.B. Du Bois famously declared that the “problem of the twentieth century” would be the color line and that this fundamental problem involved the relations of the white and darker

⁷Much has been made, of course, of the notorious voyage of the HMS Bounty, one of the objects of which was the transference of Pacific breadfruit trees to the West Indies for consumption by plantation laborers, i.e. enslaved Africans and African-Americans. There are other examples of Pacific/Atlantic interaction: the importation of East Indian and Chinese laborers to the Caribbean, for example, as well as the continuance of a slave trade (if not in law then in practice) between Melanesia and other French colonial possessions off the coast of East Africa and the Caribbean.

races of mankind, he made sure to include “the islands of the sea” in his discussion. As usual, Dr. Du Bois was ahead of his time; these islands are more than simply “islands of history” they are powerful symbols of how intricately identity can be structured and how far identity and identity politics can be stretched.

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