Gazing Back: Communing with Our Ancestors

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It’s hard for me to believe, but it has been nearly nineteen years since I first sat in David Hanlon’s World Civilization’s course along with about 300 other undergraduates. It was a huge theatre, too large for just one haole professor with a quiet and untheatrical demeanor, who showed one film the whole semester and relied on an overhead projector to show his lecture outline as his only other visual aid. It was too large a room and too impersonal a setting and he was too unassuming a teacher to have had such a profound impact on my life.

I was not even middle-aged then, and I am elderly now. And it has been the blink of an eye.

In that blink I have become a historian myself, ‘ae, but also a kumu, a teacher for my people, the ʻŌiwi, the Kanaka Maoli, the poʻe Hawai‘i. I have added three children in that time and have watched my firstborn reach adulthood, travel to university, return, and marry. I watched my mother battle cancer and succumb, and I imagine her present at every important function of my life, including the wedding of my son. And these are not just aimless images I am presenting to you now, but the very stuff of life, the things that entrance us, that grasp and shake us, these events we should remember and memorialize in our histories.

My mother links me to a lineage of Native ali‘i and Ka‘huna, as well as Hakka immigrants from southern China and Americans of German ancestry, most recently from Dayton, Ohio. My father’s moʻokuʻauhau is simpler and more substantial to me since I met some of his relatives in Portugal over 30 years ago, and his mother, a full blooded ʻŌiwi woman of kaukau ali‘i descent was such a presence in my childhood. As for my mother’s non-native relatives—her American father arrived in Hawai‘i determined to cut himself off from his family, while her memory of her Chinese grandfather was a faint and dream-like whisper of an old man and a cloud of opium smoke. They are present, these ancestors, but mostly in a limited version of my imagination. I cannot imagine what they sounded like, what they looked like. I cannot imagine what they would have thought of me.

But when I conjure up the presence of my Kupuna ʻŌiwi, I have much less trouble envisioning their relationship with me and hearing their opinions, approving and otherwise, about my children. I see them when I teach the history of the Hawaiian nation, the Lāhui. I see them working the earth and joyful in the sea. I see them in love, betrayal, and grief. I see them plant and build, and I see them prepare for war. Mostly, I see them gazing expectantly at me. And I gaze back.

Somewhere in the middle of seeing my mother’s life weaken and my first book actually materialize I came to the realization that I had become a very odd sort of historian. I had come to believe that the stories and epics that I knew were important not because they represented people and events whose existence and occurrences could be verified, but because they were lessons to me, and to anyone who cared to listen, about who we are and how we should live our lives. I teach and I write moʻolelo—not history, perhaps as you all know it. I tell stories.

Some of the stories I tell are what you might expect from a historian. In a class called Post-contact chiefs of Hawai‘i I spend three lectures on the life and times of Kamehameha Paiea, Ka Na‘i Aupuni (the Conqueror). This is a fascinating story for Hawaiians, I find. It is not only a story of conquest and political strategy, not only an account of how European and American technologies and aims are enfolded in the fierce changes at the dawn of the nineteenth century, not just a history to inspire a sense of glory in our past. No, these are stories of real people acting in very understandable ways. These are families in love and intrigue with one another. They are stories about jealousy and honor, about suspicion and disdain, about ambition and loyalty, venality and vision. They are leadership stories and they are supremely important to my own people in our time and place.

I speak of these men and women in ways that I hope enable every Hawaiian in the audience to identify with them. I myself put faces on these men and women, these great chiefs who are still remembered with such aloha by the Kanaka Maoli, and they are the faces of people whom I knew in this life. I embellish by reconstructing their characters...
with what has been recounted about these ali`i in spoken
tales and published accounts—Kamehameha was a reluctant
dictator, not at all eager to kill the cousin who stood in
the way of his supremacy on Hawai`i island. I think he
possessed an imagination capable of seeing a life of ease and
laughter, and I believe he had more than a little resentment
for the warrior chiefs like Ke`eaumoku, the disappointed
and easily insulted Kona chief who pushed Kamehameha to
adopt the discipline of war. I picture the conqueror as large
and clear-eyed, very sharp but with an easy sense of humor
and no particular axe to grind with anyone. I picture him
late in life, almost bemused by what his work had wrought.

I believe that I can understand the motivations and
behaviors of great chiefs like Kamehameha because I
have seen such behavior and attitudes among the people
who surrounded me in my youth; gentle, easy people for
the most part, but tempered by an unyielding discipline,
dignity, and self-respect. I always knew that such self-
respect came out of a practice of respect for individuals
who earned it, and for that reason, I always understood
that our ancient deference to great chiefs, or Ali`i Nui as we
reverently called them, was nested not in obsequiousness
but in an unflagging pride, almost haughtiness, with which
we carried ourselves.

Examples abound. Consider the warrior chiefs of the
Kaua`i Ali`i Nui Kaneoneo who accompanied their Mo`i
aboard the Discovery when it landed at Waimea Bay in 1778.
When Captain Clerke, in all innocence, clapped the shoulder
of the sacred Ali`i Nui, it took the restraint of the chief
himself to prevent his warriors from killing Clerke then
and there for his violation of the kapu. I also wonder what
sort of expression Hawai`i island Mo`i Kalani`opu`u must
have worn when James Cook returned his gift of his own
magnificent `ahu`ula—feathered cloak—with the cotton shirt
he was wearing. What did Cook see in the aspect of this
chief—was it incredulousness? Contempt? Whatever it was,
the Mo`i's countenance must have communicated something
across the cultural divide, for Cook reconsidered and added
the gift of his sabre.

To visualize these ancestors is to verify not only their
identities, but our own identities as well. Furthermore,
portraying the behavior of these great chiefs in ways that
are sensible to us, not only humanizes them, but humanizes
history, as we start to understand that there are not really
mysterious forces behind historical events—history is
simply the result of humans being themselves.

For Hawaiians, ancestry is the root of everything that
we know and everything that is knowable about ourselves.
There is probably not a person alive today who, with even
a miniscule amount of Hawaiian blood, could not trace
his or her descent to one or more of the great chiefly lin-
eages that stretch back close to one hundred generations
to Papahānaumoku and Wākea. These two ancestors are
credited with having birthed Hawai`i Pae`aina: the islands,
taro, and all human beings. No matter how we have been
changed, transformed by conversion, dispossession, and
even the seductions of modern society; no matter how
shattering the great dying of our people at the end of the
eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth, even
a drop of Hawaiian blood connects one to thousands of
years of ancestors who populated these islands and those
of the South Pacific.

Ancestry is what is left, after the loss of people and
lands, after the seizure of our government, after the loss
of language and the steady demoralization of our people
young and old. We are still able to connect to the dizzy-
ingly vibrant days when our chiefs numbered in the tens
of thousands and our people were as numerous as the
sand and stars. We do not connect with them in symbolic
and imaginative ways only; through our mo`olelo and
mo`okū`auhau, we may treasure our own lives as continu-
ings of theirs and take pride in grafting our stories and
our lineages onto the ones that they established.

In 1999, a U.S. Supreme Court decision brought an end
to nearly two decades of election practices through which
`Oiwi had been able to select trustees to the state's Office
of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA). This practice was challenged
by a haole rancher as discriminatory, which of course, it
was. In response to the arguments posed by the state of
Hawai`i that such discrimination was not based on race
but ancestry, the Supreme Court chose not to make a dis-
tinction, and based on that blurring of distinctions, Harold
Rice and his friends have spent the last few years suing
the very existence of OHA, the Department of Hawaiian
Home Lands, the Hawaiian preference admission policy of
the Kamehameha Schools, and the tuition waivers that are
occasionally granted to a few hundred Native Hawaiian
students at the University of Hawai`i.
In our struggle to retain these small, yet very critical resources for our own people, we have been caught in a strange net of discourse over race, entitlement, and law that, of course, is woven into America’s own terrible history of slavery and apartheid. While it appears that this struggle is defined in American legal and historical terms, the deeper and more critical issue is whether we may protect our ancestral connections and maintain them as meaningful legacies for our children and grandchildren. For of all of the cultural legacies we may still possess, the loss of this legitimacy of blood is a loss both of legal protection and our own sense of history.

When I began to research the dissertation that produced the book *Dismembering Lāhui*, I was primarily interested in examining law as a discursive power. I had no idea that immersing myself in legislative journals, constitutional convention minutes, and newspaper editorials would subject me to such an incredible array of individuals, Kanaka ‘Ōiwi, who had never before been portrayed in anyone’s history. I learned from their words and their struggles how complex an institution the Kingdom was; how systematically it betrayed the interests of the poor and powerless among our people in favor of the commerce and promise of sugar, and how, nevertheless, the Kingdom was beloved. I learned that our people appreciated the ironies of modern law, and understood quite clearly when it was used against them, but once having pledged to the law, they obeyed it unstintingly.

I saw them confront the waves of diseases that killed off their families and stunted new generations, while missionaries and businessmen, often one and the same, pronounced them unfit and predicted their annihilation. I saw them respond to those pronouncements with a grace and dignity that in these times especially, is unimaginable. I am also astonished that our people would bear the burden of these accusations of their inadequacy with such overwhelming decorum and forbearance. And most of all, I find it telling that faced with simply surrendering to the overwhelming American ideology that we are better off as citizens of their most powerful nation, we still prefer to be ourselves.

That is ancestry. One does not have to remember only the great warrior chiefs like Kamehameha to feel pride in our nation, we can but look back three or four generations to a people who had forsaken warfare, who were literate and landless, but intensely loyal to one another and fiercely loved their Queen. In some ways I do believe that the government seized by Americans in 1893 was an empty gourd; the real nation, the Lāhui, was intact and continued to live on homesteads, on beaches, in prisons, through music and hula, and because of families that continued the old values of cooperation, sharing, and even sacrifice. It was, after all, young men and women in my generation who defied the U.S. Navy and the federal government and embraced the island of Kaho'olawe as an ancestral sibling, facing arrest, or even dismemberment and death in order to bring an end to the destruction of that island and her return to our care.

Oh yes. These are the stories, the mo'olelo that we tell in our classrooms. These are the secrets that we share with our haumāna, our students. “O ‘oe ka Lāhui” “You are the nation.” And with every story we tell that demonstrates our
ancestors living their lives, every splendid and petty pursuit, every gesture of magnanimity and reprisal, we draw closer to one another and celebrate our kinship.

In the end we will defeat every effort to make us disappear. Our memory of our ancestors who faced greater uncertainties than ours will sustain us. Ironically, it is the very antithesis of racism, our willingness—no, eagerness—to mate with every possible ethnicity that empowers our race. Harold Rice and Thurston Twigg-Smith ought to fear us, and not because of the piddling “entitlements” that they seek to end. They ought to fear that sooner or later, one of their children or grandchildren is going to fall in love with one of ours. Then they’ll have their hands full.

I began this essay with a tribute to a great teacher and would like to finish by gesturing back to David Hanlon again. I said he was an unassuming teacher. I cannot tell you how important I think that is. To teach without assuming that you are changing the world is to change the world, even if it’s the world of one person’s imagination. To tutor and correct without imposing oneself is not merely a generous act, it is for me and the way I approach history and teaching, the key to both enterprises.

When we tell these mo‘olelo, we could whisper—E hāmāu (be silent). This story is of someone you may know. Listen to their voices. Let them remind you of who you are. E hāmāu a ho‘olohe. Be silent and listen.