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# The Color of Violence

Haunani Kay Trask

AT ONE TIME, THE LAND UPON WHICH THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA Cruz, sits, as all lands in California, was home to an untold number of Native tribes that occupied this area for over 20,000 years. Who were these indigenous peoples? Of the Native nations we do know in an area from the Northern California border down to the Golden Gate Bridge in the west and Yosemite National Park in the east, an area of 250 miles by 200 miles, there were Tolowa, Yurok, Chilula, Karok, Shasta, Wiyot, Whilkut, Yana, Waintu, Maidu, Washo, Konkow, Patwin, Wappo, Pomo, Paiute, Ohlone, and many, many others (Stannard, 1992: 21).

Few of these tribes remain today. From the 18th century onward, California Indians were rounded up in Jesuit and Franciscan missions that were, in historian David Stannard's (*Ibid.*: 137) words, "furnaces of death." Mission Indians died as a result of European-introduced diseases, malnutrition and brutal enslavement, fatal forms of punishment, and sexual abuses.

California Governor Peter Burnett enunciated an official policy of genocide in his 1851 message to the California legislature, in which he argued that the ongoing wars against Native peoples "must continue to be waged between the races until the Indian becomes extinct" (*Ibid.*: 144).

The situation in South America was no different. During the course of four centuries — from the 1490s to the 1890s — Europeans and white Americans engaged in what Stannard calls "the worst human holocaust the world has ever witnessed." From an estimated population on two American continents of some 75 million Native people at contact, only some five million remained at the end of the 19th century (*Ibid.*: 146).

Colonization was the historical process, and genocide the official policy.

Genocide: any act committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part,

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national, ethnic, racial, or religious groups, including killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about physical destruction of the group in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and forcibly transferring children of one group to another group. This is the accepted United Nations definition (United Nations, 1948).

Genocide: European conquest of the Americas.

Colonialism: The historical process of conquest and exploitation.

The United States of America: a country created out of genocide and colonialism.

Today, the United States is the most powerful country in the world, a violent country created out of the bloody extermination of Native peoples, the enslavement of forcibly transported peoples, and the continuing oppression of dark-skinned peoples.

The color of violence, then, is the color of white over black, white over brown, white over red, white over yellow. It is the violence of north over south, of continents over archipelagoes, of settlers over natives and slaves.

Shaping this color scheme are the labyrinths of class and gender, of geography and industry, of metropolises and peripheries, of sexual definitions and confinements.

There is not just one binary opposition, but many oppositions. Within colonialism, such as that now practiced in my own country of Hawai'i, violence against women of color, especially our Native women, is the economic and cultural violence of tourism and of militarism. It is the violence of our imprisonments: reservations, incarcerations, diasporas. It is the violence of military bases, of the largest porting of nuclear submarines in the world, of the inundation of our exquisite islands by eager settlers and tourists from the American and Asian continents.

These settlers have no interest in, or concern about, our Native people. Settlers of all colors come to Hawai'i for refuge, for relaxation. They do not know, nor do they care, that white sugar planters overthrew our Native government in 1893 with the willing aid of the American troops; that our islands were annexed in 1898 against the expressed wishes of our Native people; that our political status as Hawaiian citizens was made impossible by forced annexation to the United States. Most non-Natives think we should be grateful for the alleged opportunity of American citizenship, even if this has meant termination as an independent country (Blount, 1893).

How do we, as a terminated people, understand the color of violence? We look at all the non-Native settlers and tourists around us and know we are subjugated in our own land, suffering landlessness and poverty, consigned by the American government to the periphery of our own country, to its prisons and shanties, to its welfare rolls, hospital wards, and graveyards.

We exist in a violent and violated world, a world characterized by "peaceful

violence,” as Frantz Fanon (1968: 81) so astutely observed. This is the peaceful violence of historical dispossession, of racial, cultural, and economic subjugation and stigmatization. Our psychological suffering and our physical impairments are a direct result of this peaceful violence, of the ordered realities of confinement, degradation, ill health, and early death.

Allow me to shock you with a profile of our health statistics. Below one year of age, the Hawaiian death rate is more than double the overall state average. Between one and four years of age, it is triple the state figure, and so on through early adulthood. In every age category up to age 30, the Hawaiian death rate is never less than double and is often triple the equivalent mortality rate in our islands. With just under 20% of the state’s population, Hawaiians account for nearly 75% of the state’s deaths for persons less than 18 years of age. Although the mortality rate for non-Hawaiians decreased significantly between 1980 and 1990, it actually increased for full and part-Hawaiians (Stannard, 2000).

This state of ill health is, of course, Fanon’s “peaceful violence” that kills without a sound, without a passing notice. Indeed, most of the oppression and violence people of color experience is hidden from view. In our case, more Hawaiians live below the poverty level than any other ethnic group in Hawai‘i. More of our people are in prison, are homeless, or are undereducated. Is this a violent situation? Of course. Is this a result of American colonization? Of course.

Colonialism began with conquest and is today maintained by a settler administration created out of the doctrine of cultural hierarchy. It is a hierarchy in which Euro-Americans and whiteness dominate non-Euro-Americans and darkness. That is, ours is a country in which race prejudice, in the words of Fanon, obeys a flawless logic. After all, if inferior peoples must be exterminated, their cultures and habits of life, their languages and customs, their economies, indeed, every difference about them must be assaulted, confined, and obliterated. Because there must be a dominant culture, there must be a dominant people, a dominant religion, a dominant language, a dominant legal system, a dominant educational system, and so on, and so on. In other words, there must be dominance and subordination.

In a colonial country such as the United States, white hegemony delineates this hierarchy. Thus, white people are the dominant group, Christianity is the dominant religion, capitalism is the dominant economy, and militarism is the dominant form of diplomacy and the underlying force of international relations. Violence is thus normal, and race prejudice, like race violence, is as American as apple pie.

In a racist society, there is no need to justify white racist behavior. The naturalness of segregation and hierarchy is the naturalness of hearing English on the street, or seeing a McDonalds on every other corner, or assuming the U.S. dollar and United Airlines will enable a vacation in Hawai‘i, my native country. Indeed, the natural, everyday presence of the “way things are” explains the strength and resilience of racism. Racism envelops us, intoxicating our thoughts, permeating our brains and skins, determining the shape of our growth and the longevity of our lives.

It is normal that hierarchy by color exists, that mistreatment by color exists, that income by color exists, that life expectancy by color exists, that opportunity by color exists, as well as all the other observable hierarchies documented by scholars over the years. The sheer normalcy of white dominance underpins the racist assertion that white people and culture are superior, for if they were not, how else do we explain their overwhelming dominance in the United States (Hacker, 1992).

Dominance is the cause and engine of racism. Power over peoples and land and economies. Power to take and consume. Power to define and confine. Power to maintain power.

There is no escape from origins: colonial countries are racist countries. The United States of America exists because centuries of extermination campaigns were waged to rid the continent of millions of Native peoples, by some estimates, 100 million.

And after taking the continent, the United States took Hawai'i and Guam and Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Born in conquest, the United States continues in conquest.

Let me tell you about my own country. Like most Native peoples, Hawaiians lived in our mother's keeping until the fateful coming of the *haole* — Western foreigners — in 1778. Then our world collapsed from the violence of contact: disease, mass death, and land dispossession; evangelical Christianity; plantation capitalism; cultural destruction, including language banning; and finally, American military invasion in 1893, and forced annexation in 1898. During the course of little more than a century, the *haole* onslaught had taken from us 95% of our Hawaiian people, 99% of our lands and waters, and the entirety of our political sovereignty. As the 20th century dawned, we were but a remnant of the great and ancient people we had once been (Trask, 1999: 10).

During the long suppression of our Territorial period (1900 to 1959), Hawaiians lived under martial law for seven years throughout World War II. We suffered increased land confiscations for military bases and fearfully watched as the vicious process of Americanization created racist political, educational, and economic institutions. By the time of my birth in 1949, being Hawaiian was a racial and cultural disadvantage rather than a national definition. The U.S. federal government had officially classified our people by blood quantum in 1921: those of us of 50% Hawaiian blood quantum were Native, and those of us of less than 50% were not Native. "Fifty-percenters," as they have come to be known today, have some small claims to live on what amounts to reservation land; "less than fifties" do not have such rights. In this way, our nation is divided by race, a concept and reality foreign to our way of thinking. Thus, was I born into captivity, a Native person in a racist, anti-Native world.

And so it is for people of color on this continent. We are nonwhite in a white universe. We are different, and therefore inferior, categorically. And we are marked by captivity: economic, political, and cultural captivity.

Indeed, “captivity” is the condition of all the peoples of the Pacific region. Covering half the earth’s surface, the Pacific is home to 32 countries and many nations. We are the largest nuclearized region in the world. And we know one thing for certain: until the Pacific is decolonized, it cannot be demilitarized (Ishtar, 1998).

Let me frighten you with some statistics. On O’ahu, the capital of our state and the most densely populated island, the military controls 25% of the land area. Statewide, the combined U.S. armed forces have 21 installations, 26 housing complexes, eight training areas, and 19 miscellaneous bases and operating sites. Beyond O’ahu, Hawai’i is the linchpin of the U.S. military strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. It is home to the largest portage of nuclear-fueled ships and submarines in the world. These ships are received, cleaned, and refashioned at Pearl Harbor, where workers are called “sponges” because of their high absorption of radiation during cleaning.

Regionally, Hawai’i is the forward basing point for the U.S. military in the Pacific. The Seventh Fleet, which patrols the world from the Pacific to the coast of Africa, is stationed at Pearl Harbor. Planes and ships that test nuclear weapons in the Pacific leave from Pearl Harbor or other military installations in Hawai’i (Kajihiro, 2000).

This kind of “peaceful violence” results in land confiscations, contamination of our plants, animals, and our peoples, and the transformation of our archipelago into a poisonous war zone. Additionally, many of the lands taken by the military are legally reserved lands for Hawaiians.

In the southern and eastern Pacific, U.S. military violence has taken the form of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands, the dumping of nuclear waste on Christmas Island, the siting of electronic facilities vital to nuclear war, and construction of air bases with nuclear capabilities, including airborne delivery of weapons. To the east of Hawai’i, in the Marianas Islands and Guam, there are airbases with nuclear capabilities.

The violence of nuclearization and militarization associated with nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands includes the detonation of over 66 bombs. We must all remember that the world’s first hydrogen bomb was tested on Bikini Island. The force of this weapon of destruction was 1,000 times stronger than the Hiroshima bomb. Marshall Islanders were used as guinea pigs to test the effects of contamination. They were never told of the bomb’s effects, and were not removed before testing (Keju-Johnson, 1998: 16).

Predictably, cancer is now widespread among the Marshallese. They have one of the highest rates of severely deformed children, including “jellyfish babies” who have no heads, arms, legs, or human shape. Native women from these islands have given birth to babies they describe as “octopuses,” “turtles,” and “apples.” Such babies are born not only on islands declared radioactive by the Americans, but on all atolls and five major islands in the Marshalls archipelago (*Ibid.*: 17).

Before such tests, Marshallese people enjoyed incredible longevity, with

many of their people living over 100 years. Today, they have young women with a life expectancy of 40 years of age. The United States tested 23 bombs on Bikini Island and 43 on Enewetak. Now, the Marshallese know that their nation has been damaged forever as a result of the United States of America (*Ibid.*: 18).

In our part of the world, the color of violence has been the color of white countries, the United States and France, testing nuclear weapons, deploying nuclear ships, and basing military forces in every part of the north and south Pacific.

Nuclearization is a unique kind of racism. It is the kind that produced famous Nazi doctors and forced sterilization of Indian women in America, centuries of genocidal campaigns against the rest of the Third and Fourth Worlds, and continues to produce and reproduce a psychology of subjugation.

For racism is not only history and sociology, economics and politics. Racism is also the psychology of subjugation. The inferior must be made to feel inferior every day, to suffer their subjugation, to be dehumanized in accordance with the colonizer's rules. Thus, as Frantz Fanon so eloquently argued, colonized people, like colonized cultures, are no longer open, dynamic, and fertile. Once colonized, they become moribund, oppressed, segregated, closed, or apathetic. They must negotiate a hostile world and a menacing daily reality with great care, lest they suffer increased injury. Is it any wonder that white Americans, on the whole, live longer than Black and Native people do? For the colonized, the colonizer is literally a killer (Fanon, 1968).

Like the physical attributes of killers, the culture of killers becomes bloated, disfigured, and vulgar. Such cultures celebrate their vulgarity, as American culture celebrates Christopher Columbus. These celebrations follow from the center to the periphery, so that the whole is permeated with the thrill of cruelty.

Is it possible to rid the United States of racism? In light of the history of Native people in this country, I would say no. In light of the history of Black people, I would say no. In light of the current fight in the United States regarding affirmative action, I would say no. Racism has never ended in the United States. And it never *will* end.

Only the dismantling of the United States as we know it could begin the process of ending racism. Look to history. After the genocidal campaigns against American Indians came the confinements of reservations and the slow attrition by early death, by starvation, by infant mortality, by FBI infiltration and murder.

After the freeing of slaves came lynching campaigns, segregation, ghettoization, discrimination, and now police wars and vicious imprisonments. After belated and half-hearted federal attempts at ameliorative programs in the 1960s and 1970s, Black people in this country still die younger, make less money, suffer poor housing, inferior community services, low educational attainments, tremendous police brutality, and, of course, the everyday injuries of race.

What better evidence do we need to illustrate that the U.S. is a white country for white people. As Malcolm X repeatedly said, America is irretrievably racist.

Given this, what can be done, what should be done? Fanon believed that revolutionary action was the only answer in Algeria and in Africa as a continent. Malcolm X believed that total separation of Black people from white people was the only answer in the United States. I believe that my own people need separation in Hawai'i. A separate land base, economy, educational system, language base, and so on.

Sovereignty is what we call this in Hawai'i. And what the Maori call it in Aotearoa, otherwise known by the West as New Zealand, and what African people call it. It is what Indians call it here on the continent. Sovereignty on *our* land base, with *our* rules, in *our* language, for *our* people.

Who could dare deny that sovereignty is preferable to the white racism we now suffer? After all, we are separated and segregated under white rules now. Why not acknowledge the falsity of alleged American democracy, equality, and liberty? Why fight to get into white society when it so imprisons us now? Why not create our own base of power rather than be ghettoized according to white power?

How much more honest and historically accurate it would be to acknowledge that racism prevents us as people of color from living together with white people as equals. Under the current violent hierarchy, there is only daily pain and fear. Fear because violence breeds hatred that, in turn, breeds more violence. Not the revolutionary violence that cleanses victims, as Fanon so honestly argued, but the violence of racism.

Can America afford violence, revolutionary or otherwise? For it is everywhere now. The violence of a police state protecting itself, and its white citizens. The violence of a political system dependent on mass exploitation. Looking into the heart of whiteness, I do not see a willingness to change, only a ferocious determination to keep the black masses at bay.

So be it. If we must be kept at bay, then let it be in our own place, on our own land, with our own people. And let white people and their police and their tourists and their segregated schools stay away from us. Let us return to the political status of many nations. Not one sovereignty, but many sovereignties. Not one path, but many paths.

You may ask, but how can we do this? How can we be separate? Let me answer that first, we are separate now: separate, hostile, and unequal. We are ghettoized by a hierarchy in which people of color, and particularly indigenous people, occupy the bottom strata and in which white people occupy the top.

Second, white people oppose not separatism, but the dissolution of their intimate and raw power over our lives. To have our own nations is what the white powers oppose, simply because they don't want to give up their dominance over us and our resources, especially our labor and lands. *White people oppose separate sovereignties, not separatism per se.*

As Native peoples all over the world know — as the Irish, the Kurds, the Palestinians, and the Maori know — it is a never-ending struggle to be both separate

and sovereign. Because of millennia of resistance, the Irish people remain, and the Kurdish people remain, and the Palestinian people remain, and the Maori people remain. Resistance and the legacy of resistance to incorporation, to disinheritance, to disappearance have kept these nations alive.

Women's leadership has been formative in this resistance. Let me mention some of our indigenous women leaders in the Pacific Basin: Lijon Ekniland of the Marshall Islands, who has represented her people all over the world in testifying to the effects of nuclear testing and radioactivity; Tamara Bopp du Pont, a member of the Polynesian Liberation Front of Tahiti and an outspoken critic of French nuclear testing in the Pacific; Isabella Sumang, a fierce defender of the world's first nuclear-free constitution in Belau and a constant critic of U.S. military imperialism in the Pacific; my sister, Mililani Trask, who created our largest sovereignty initiative, Ka Lāhui Hawai'i, including our Native Constitution and Master Plan; Jacqui Katona, of the Gundgehi Aboriginal Association, who has opposed Australian uranium mining in the Mirrar peoples' lands; Josephine Kauona Sirivi, of Bougainville, who founded and became the first president of the Bougainvillean Women for Peace and Freedom and is still a combatant in the war for Bougainvillean independence from Papua New Guinea. These women leaders, and many more unknown, continue to carry the burden of indigenous resistance against imperialism (Ekniland, 1998; Katona, 1998; Kauona Sirivi, 1998).

My message today is one of remembrance and resistance: we are not one people, and it is racist to believe that we *are* one people. I join with Toni Morrison, one of the finest writers of our age, in asserting that I am not American. Nor, I might add, do I want to be American. Those who believe as I do, especially those who did not become part of the United States voluntarily, will surely nod in agreement.

For in the ugly and violent history of the United States, indeed, of the Americas, you will find that many peoples and many nations occupy these lands, not under the Christian God or the United States Constitution, but in the diverse humanity of peoples, in the many-colored family of nations.

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