

# Eulogy

## Haunani-Kay Trask Activist, scholar, poet 1949 ——— 2021

by OLIVIA GAGAN



Photography by Ed Greedy.

*“No matter what Americans believe, most of us in the colonies do not feel grateful that our country was stolen, along with our citizenship, our lands, and our independent place among the family of nations. We are not happy Natives.”*

*Haunani-Kay Trask*

Haunani-Kay Trask was a Hawaiian scholar, activist, and poet who constantly challenged the United States’ colonisation of Hawai’i and spent her career calling for the country to be returned to itself.

The United States claimed Hawai’i with the illegal overthrow of its monarch Queen Lili’uokalani in 1893 and declared the islands a US territory in 1898. Hawai’i became the 50th US state in 1959. Trask’s life’s work was to reinstate a sense of pride in native Hawaiians of the history and ownership of the land and culture.

As an academic, Trask co-founded the Kamakakūokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies at the University of Hawai’i in Mānoa. She taught the history of Hawai’i and the writing and politics of its women. Her uncompromising activism and politics alienated many; one encounter with a student led to global headlines after she criticised his views. A white student, Joseph Carter, wrote a letter in the campus newspaper about ‘Caucasian-bashing’, arguing that ‘racism is not an exclusively white endeavour.’

Trask wrote a letter in response, stating that ‘Mr Carter does not understand racism at all’

and advised that he should leave the state. An international media storm ensued, and a debate about the largely unspoken history of white settlement in Hawai’i was ignited. Many called for Trask to be gentler with the student—but she was unrepentant. ‘I am so proud to be angry,’ she responded. ‘I am not soft, I am not sweet, and I do not want any more tourists.’

She constantly sought to dismantle Hawai’i’s reputation as a haven for tourists and settlers, and of Hawaiians as relaxed, welcoming people. To Trask, conforming to such stereotypes meant native Hawaiians were being forced to accept their colonisation and their fate as annexed Americans. ‘I break the ideology of “happy natives”...and that makes me dangerous,’ she said.

Trask’s essays, poetry, and documentaries highlighted the decimation of the native population and its cultures through colonisation and disease brought to the islands by settlers. Her book *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai’i* dissected colonialism and concepts of sovereignty in a nation commodified into plastic flower leis, dancing girls, and coconuts. At the time of writing it, there were 30 tourists

for every native Hawaiian.

Trask argued that the gentle, caretaking spirit of Hawaiians, who for millennia have lived by the values of Mālama ‘āina—of actively caring for and nurturing the land—has been institutionalised as a tool of suppression and oppression.

Many of Trask’s fears have come to pass: Today, 90% of Hawai’i’s food is imported, leaving its citizens incredibly vulnerable and likely unable to sustain themselves in the event of a major supply chain failure or attack. Its energy, too, is made up of around 85% fossil fuels, largely imported from volatile states like Russia and Libya.

Trask came from a family of activists and thinkers. Her sister is a political speaker and attorney and her long-term partner was the American historian David Stannard. She remained professor emeritus at the University of Hawai’i until her death.

Trask died in Honolulu, aged 71.