Title
Localizing the Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. in Post-Statehood Hawai'i: Local Engagement with the Civil Rights Movement and the Development of the African American Movement on O'ahu

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Localizing the Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. in Post-Statehood Hawai‘i: Local Engagement with the Civil Rights Movement and the Development of the African American Movement on O‘ahu

This thesis analyzes how residents of Hawai‘i have derived inspirations from the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King Jr.’s legacy since the 1960s to the present. Although they did not have many direct relationships, African Americans, university students, politicians, and activists from diverse ethnic backgrounds in Hawai‘i retained an admiration of the civil rights leader and employed his symbolism to fulfill their political goals. The primary aims of this research are: to explore the direct relationship between the Civil Rights Movement and Hawai‘i and to uncover experiences of African Americans in Hawai‘i since the 1960s. The first two chapters examine Hawai‘i’s residents’ involvement in the Civil Rights Movement in the continental America and the development of local grassroots activism in Hawai‘i. The latter three chapters concentrate on the state recognition of Martin Luther King Jr. Day in Hawai‘i as well as the development of African American movement on O‘ahu. This thesis offers new insights into the study of the contemporary history of America and Hawai‘i as well as race and ethnic relations.

The first part argues that the multifaceted King’s legacy allowed sometimes connecting but in other times disuniting residents of Hawai‘i to organize their social movement. Chapter 1 illustrates a role of students of University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa who paved a way to attracting interests in the campaigns challenging racism and voting system in the U.S. South among the wider public of Hawai‘i. The students’ involvement in the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s was one of the main findings of this research because much previous literature claims the rise of student activism in Hawai‘i originated in the late 1960s when they started protesting Vietnam War. King’s ideal of racial integration and non-violence appealed to the residents. They sympathized with racial segregation and discrimination in the American South which they perceived as overlapping with their own immigrant history of Hawai‘i. After social movements during the 1940s and 50s advocating equality for nonwhites successfully undercut the dominance over Hawai‘i by white elites and the Republican Party, Hawai‘i’s residents started enjoying the multiethnic society. With an aim at conveying Hawai‘i’s message that integration would work also in American South, civil rights activists and students jointly got involved in the campaigns by traveling from Hawai‘i in the early 1960s.

Chapter 2 analyzes how the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968
exerted divergent influence on student activists and the wider public especially the African American community. The different remembrance of King’s legacy led to different trajectories for the student movement, on the one hand, and that of the African American community on the other. Student activists forged anti-Vietnam War movement connecting issues of poverty and racism against people of color in America and Third World countries after the assassination of King. They intended to remember King’s legacy linking domestic and international issues and to continue his work after his death. The student new activism received criticism from the wider public because they often advocated radical approaches. On the other hand, the African American community shared a very pessimistic view by forecasting that the Civil Rights Movement would die without the leadership of King. African Americans hesitated to get involved in radical local movements or organize their own activism which would cause conflict with the majority non-African American residents and further result in marginalization in Hawaiian society. After King’s death, Charles M. Campbell, a key African American civil rights activist in Hawai‘i, became a Democratic politician to carry on King’s legacy of racial integration and non-violence by connecting Hawaiian old value of the aloha spirit encouraging to act with love and friendless to others. Campbell prioritized creating healthy ethnic relations rather than expanding awareness of the war abroad or exclusion of African American history in the society of Hawai‘i. Hence, African American movement did not emerge along with the rise of Native Hawaiian movement and other local struggles in the late 1960s.

The latter part examines the recognition of Martin Luther King Jr. Day (MLK Day) as a state holiday in Hawai‘i by bringing new attention to the experiences of African Americans in Hawai‘i. Chapter 3 discusses the African American community’s contribution to achieving the recognition of MLK Day as a state holiday in Hawai‘i. Although the African American community had been silent about civil rights and their own issues, African Americans who moved to Hawai‘i in the 1970s and 80s forged the movement in the mid-1980s to revive King’s spirit in Hawai‘i. The fact that the state government failed to recognize MLK Day as a state holiday due to financial concerns motivated the small African American community to unite and rise up to achieve the recognition. This upsurge of the African American social activism was another key finding as no research had addressed African American activism in Hawai‘i to date. The African American proponents pressed for the legislation of MLK Day as a state holiday by making coalitions within their community and with other ethnic communities. They highlighted that the fruits of the Civil Rights Movement benefitted not only African Americans but also Hawai‘i’s residents to convince the relevance of MLK Day
recognition to Hawai‘i. This argument worked well to gain support for the recognition of MLK Day from state legislators and non-African American residents. With the MLK Day recognition, the African American community started receiving respect from legislators and other ethnic communities.

Chapter 4 analyzes annual MLK Day celebration activities in Hawai‘i from the late 1980s to the present. MLK Day celebrating activities created a space for African American residents to appreciate their own history which was widely overlooked in Hawaiian society and show their presence. At the same time, MLK Day celebration became a place to heighten awareness issues surrounding global peace, economic equality, and social justice. Especially, the organizers paid closer attention to the issues of the Persian Gulf War and the Annexation of Hawai‘i with their celebration activities. These activities challenge views in the previous literature which claims that the MLK Day celebration merely portrays King’s ideal of racial integration and peace. In addition, they answered some of state legislators’ criticism that the MLK Day celebration was significant for only African Americans by showing how the Day was meaningful for all people.

The final chapter provides a case study of social movement of African American residents of Hawai‘i beyond the MLK Day celebration. The MLK Day celebration allowed to build not only coalitions inside of Hawai‘i but also transnational ties with citizens of Nagasaki, Japan. Through friendship between activists in Hawai‘i and Nagasaki, they corporately promoted anti-nuclear movement calling for global peace. In addition, this unique activism promoted by African Americans in Hawai‘i reflected the tradition of prominent leaders of the Black Freedom Movement including W.E.B. Dubois, Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Huey P. Newton who have linked the domestic and international struggle and joined a larger global fight against white supremacy and imperialism.

This thesis concludes that people of Hawai‘i in general acknowledged King’s legacy challenging white racism and segregation by connecting Hawai‘i’s own immigrant history. Some local younger generation activists and students who were often considered as “radical” and African American proponents of MLK Day remembered King’s aspects which criticized the federal government for economic inequality and involvement in the Vietnam War and utilized his legacy for their social movements. The support of the Civil Rights Movement and the recognition of MLK Day enabled to reinforce the Democratic Party’s policy committed to equality of non-white residents although Asian American politicians especially Japanese Americans began to share power with whites and dominate Hawaiian society. Additionally, the MLK Day
celebration allowed the Democratic politicians to shift their contemporary responsibility to the federal government and the Republican Party regarding social injustice to Native Hawaiians and other subordinate groups in Hawai‘i by acknowledging their contribution to overturning the white elites’ domination of Hawai‘i.