

The Aloha State's turbulent relations

In examining Hawaii's past, author and radio personality Sarah Vowell sees the best and worst of American history

BY ROBERT ALFORD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Sarah Vowell is a very, very busy person. She's the New York Times bestselling author of "Assassination Vacation" and "The Wordy Shipmates," a frequent contributor to Public Radio International's "This American Life" and she serves on the board of Dave Egger's educational nonprofit organization 826NYC. She even lent her trademark deadpan vocal delivery to Pixar's 2004 animated feature "The Incredibles."

Vowell's writing combines conventions of history, journalism and tongue-in-cheek satire that is often as hilarious as it is thought-provoking. She revels in the absurdities and contradictions of American history, exposing the hypocrisies of power while remaining personally committed to the ideals upon which our democracy was founded. Her latest book, "Unfamiliar Fishes," explores the history of Hawaii, and the American missionaries, sailors, plantation owners and imperialists who arrived on its shores in the 19th century. Vowell recently took some time out of her busy schedule to discuss her work with Street Roots Sister paper, Real Change in Seattle.

Robert Alford: *What is the historical significance of the glop of macaroni salad on a Hawaiian plate lunch?*

Sarah Vowell: On a Hawaiian plate lunch, which is a traditional mixed plate that is served throughout the Hawaiian Islands, there is always a scoop of macaroni salad along with two scoops of Japanese style rice and then some sort of Asian or Polynesian fish or meat. The macaroni salad is this little American anomaly amidst that Pacific smorgasbord and the whole lunch hints at the multiethnic saga that is the history of Hawaii, starting with the arrival of the New England missionaries in 1820 and going up through the 19th century when the missionaries and their offspring founded the sugar plantations that became the foundation of the Hawaiian economy for about a century. And for those plantations to run, those New Englanders and their descendants had to import labor from all over the world — Japan, China, the Philippines and Korea — but also Portugal, and to a lesser extent Norway. My book is mostly about those people: the Haole, the Caucasians, the Americans who showed up and changed the islands. And so a glop of macaroni salad is not just a glop of macaroni salad: It's indicative of centuries of change.



PHOTO BY BENNETT MILLER

R.A.: *How do the words "aloha" and "haole" represent the differences between Hawaiian and Western cultures?*

S.V.: "Aloha" is to my mind the most Hawaiian word, and on the mainland we just hear that it means "hello" and "goodbye," which is true and it also basically means "love." But, literally translated, it has to do with the word "breath." It can mean "the breath of life," and the reason it's said as a greeting is that the traditional Polynesian greeting is when two people touch noses and then literally breathe each other in.

Now the word "haole" — which also contains that word "ha," the word for breath — there's a sort of old wives' tale or myth that the word "haole" connotes "without breath," because the first Westerners who came to the islands, they did not greet one another in traditional Hawaiian. So, it's supposed to be symbolic of how alienated the white people are from the breath of life. But really, it's an old word and it can mean anything non-native including plants or animals. The story that I tell in the book is basically about the coming of the white people in general and the New Englanders in particular. These people changed the islands, and a lot of native Hawaiians think for the worse. Besides their ideas about Christianity, capitalism and private land ownership, they also brought with them their diseases, which had a devastating effect on the native population, just as it did in the Americas. So the coming of the whites to Hawaii is a pretty complicated story and there's some resentment toward those people on the part of native Hawaiians, which I find understandable.

Generally though, Hawaii is a pretty easy going, accepting place, and because of its multiethnic heritage, it is wildly integrated, especially compared to the rest of the country. It's rare to find someone who was born in Hawaii who is just one race. Even

the people who identify as native Hawaiian might have Chinese grandparents and American grandparents. But the origins of that are kind of nefarious. The reason that so many different kinds of people were shipped there wasn't because the sugar plantation owners had this "It's a small world after all" mentality. Their goal was to bring in workers from as many different places as possible because they felt that people who spoke different languages were less likely to organize against the plantation owners.

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R.A.: *How did the arrival of the New England missionaries in 1820 affect the institutions of Hawaiian society?*

S.V.: Radically. Those missionaries, they were smart people. As New Englanders, they were pretty democratic: Their only goal was to usher as many people into heaven as possible and they didn't care whether those people were commoners or chiefs. But they recognized that because Hawaiian society was so hierarchical, they were going to have