



## Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity

### WHO WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

The indigenous inhabitants, descendants, and diaspora of the Pacific Islands, comprising the Oceania\* subregions of Melanesia\* (e.g., Fijians, Papuans), Micronesia\* (e.g., Chamorro, Marshallese, I-Kiribati), and Polynesia\* (e.g., Native Hawaiians\*, Māori, Samoans). While “Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders” (NHPI) is the federal term most used, it reduces tens of thousands of islands and indigenous cultural groups—7,000+ in Papua New Guinea alone—into one homogenous label.

**NOTE:** While some Filipinx people identify as Pacific Islander (others as Asian, both, or neither), the Philippines, part of Southeast Asia, isn't a Pacific Island nation. Find factsheets for other Asian Pacific communities (East Asians, South Asians, and Southeast Asians) at [WriteInclusion.org/factsheets](https://writeinclusion.org/factsheets).

### HERE'S WHY AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Hollywood rarely depicts NHPI in leading roles, even in stories taking place in their own native lands. This practice forces them into the background and erases them from their many roles across our modern world. This kind of invisibility flattens NHPI into indistinct groups of people—frequently grouped with Asian Americans—which leads to a lack of political representation and protections for the unique needs of their communities. When NHPI are portrayed, they are usually shown as simple or “exotic” people. These stereotypes uphold imperialistic views of NHPI, disregard their many identities, cultures, and histories, and ignore the devastating impact colonialism and tourism have had on the Pacific Islands.

## NATIVE HAWAIIANS & PACIFIC ISLANDERS

### OVERREPRESENTED STORIES & HARMFUL STEREOTYPES

- **Outsiders:** Stories in the Pacific Islands told from the POV of white people (often tourists), reducing NHPI to background characters. Similarly, U.S. NHPI depicted as immigrants when most are native citizens. This casts indigenous people as outsiders in their own communities, cultures, and traditions (e.g., surfing as a white sport).
- **Inauthentic Identity:** Characters with nonspecific or inaccurate NHPI identities and traditions (e.g., non-Māori doing the haka, offensive “tiki culture”), creating caricatures rather than nuanced portrayals.
- **Simple People:** Characters without complexity or historical context, resulting in stereotypes that paint NHPI as primitive (e.g., noble savage), buffoonish (e.g., jokester), or lacking ambition and intellect (e.g., “on island time”). These falsehoods prevent NHPI viewers from seeing their full potential onscreen and allow all audiences to dismiss their issues (e.g., access to education, healthcare disparities due to historical trauma, high unemployment rates).
- **Happy Welcomers:** Characters depicted as benevolent, generous, and happy to serve visitors and colonizers (e.g., the “aloha spirit”). These portrayals silence today's NHPI fighting to preserve their sovereignty and land from predatory practices.
- **Exoticized Women:** Fetishized and sexist depictions of women (e.g., dusky maiden, hula girl), used for the romantic and sexual benefit of white men. This misappropriates NHPI cultural traditions and, more dangerously, makes NHPI women vulnerable to real-life violence.
- **Always Hawaiian:** Stories equating all NHPI identities to *only* Hawaiian identity, ignoring the full spectrum of Melanesian, Micronesian, and Polynesian experiences.
- **Bodies on Display:** NHPI made fun of for large body types or marveled at for their strength/size (i.e., only good for entertainment and sports), erasing their humanity.

### THINGS WE'D LIKE TO SEE MORE OF

- **Reframed POV:** Nuanced NHPI stories told through their own POVs. It's crucial to see NHPI as protagonists with arcs and goals, not just serving other characters' stories.
- **Cultural & Ethnic Specificity:** Characters with distinct NHPI identities and traditions, which are rich with cultural, historical, racial, and religious differences, as well as political/national affiliations (e.g., free association of the Marshall Islands, “special territory” status of Easter Island).
- **Modern Life:** Characters in modern storylines, in everyday professions, etc. While many NHPI are connected to their heritage, this doesn't mean they're “stuck in the past.” Instead, they often straddle modern and traditional worlds, keeping cultures alive through oral history, connection to the sea, indigenous belief systems, etc.
- **Multi-Dimensional:** Stories about NHPI that go beyond where they are from. Like everyone, they have families, relationships, hobbies, and jobs, and they're driven by universal wants and needs. Show NHPI living around the world and belonging in their communities no matter where they are.
- **Impact of Colonialism:** Examine the history and ongoing effects of colonization and imperialism in the Pacific Islands (e.g., U.S. overthrow of Hawaiian Kingdom; populations wiped out by foreign diseases; exploitation of natural resources; generational trauma; tourism). Show modern NHPI activists rising up in resistance to take back their cultures, traditions, and lands.
- **Underrepresented Experiences:** Nuanced portrayals of different kinds of NHPI characters (e.g., disabled, older, mixed heritage, LGBTQIA+) and a variety of NHPI identities, experiences, and cultures (e.g., Black Pacific Islanders, like Papuans; mahū and fakaleitī gender identities).

## QUICK FACTS

- The most common languages spoken by Pacific Islanders other than English are Chamorro, Chuukese, Fijian, Hawaiian, Māori, Marshallese, Palauan, Samoan, and Tongan, with at least 39 NHPI languages spoken as a second language in U.S. homes.
- 84% of Pacific Islanders living in the U.S. were born in the U.S. (across all 50 states).
- In the top 100 films of 2018, less than 1% of all characters were NHPI with speaking roles. Of those 100 films, 97 had no NHPI women characters at all.
- California has the largest populations of Samoans, Tongans, Chamorro, and Native Hawaiians outside of their native lands.
- Native Hawaiians are the largest NHPI group in the U.S., followed by Samoans and Chamorro.

## ONLINE REFERENCES & RESOURCES:

- [AAPI Data](#)
- AAPIs on TV: [“Tokens on the Small Screen”](#)
- Cultural Survival:  
[“The Aloha Industry: For Hawaiian women, tourism is not a neutral industry.”](#)  
[“Oceania: Islands, Land, People”](#)
- Empowering Pacific Islander Communities:  
[“A Community of Contrasts 2014: Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in the United States”](#)
- [Guampedia](#)
- [House of Chamorros](#)
- [Keith L. Camacho](#), Professor, Asian American Studies Department, UCLA
- [Kehaulani Vaughn](#), Assistant Professor, University of Utah
- LA Times: [“Tiki bars are built on cultural appropriation and colonial nostalgia. Where’s the reckoning?”](#)
- [Pacific Islanders in Communications](#)
- Stanford University: [“Health and Health Care of Native Hawaiian & Other Pacific Islander Older Adults”](#)
- University of Hawai‘i at Hilo: [“Eh...You Hawaiian? Examining Hawaii Five-o’s ‘Hawaiian’”](#)
- University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa  
[Hawai‘inuiākea: School of Hawaiian Knowledge Teaching Oceania Series](#)
- USC Annenberg: [“Inequality in 1,200 Popular Films”](#)

## GLOSSARY

### Melanesia:

A subregion of Oceania in the southwestern Pacific Ocean made up of four independent countries: Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands; as well as a number of islands, archipelagos, and atolls including Admiralty Islands, Bougainville Island, New Guinea, Western New Guinea, Aru Islands, New Caledonia, and Norfolk Island.

### Micronesia:

A subregion of Oceania in the western Pacific Ocean comprising thousands of islands, including Kiribati, Nauru, the Mariana Islands (e.g., Guam, Rota, Saipan, Tinian), the Republic of Marshall Islands, Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia (made up of 607 islands).

### Native Hawaiians:

The indigenous people of the Hawaiian islands (called Kānaka Maoli). Throughout history, Native Hawaiians have had their sovereignty and culture dominated and challenged by the U.S. and other Asian and European colonizers. “Native Hawaiians” does not refer to everyone who lives on or who is born in Hawai‘i.

### Oceania:

A region made up of thousands of islands across the Central and South Pacific Ocean. While the exact geography isn’t agreed upon, it usually includes the subregions of Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia, and Australasia (made up of Australia, and sometimes New Zealand and the islands of New Guinea). While Australia is part of Oceania, it’s not generally considered a Pacific Island nation (though this is debated).

### Polynesia:

A subregion of Oceania covering the southern and central Pacific Ocean made up of over 1,000 islands, archipelagos, and atolls, including Hawai‘i, New Zealand, Easter Island, Samoan Islands, Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Niue, Tokelau and Tuvalu, Tonga, Wallis and Futuna, Rotuma Island, and Pitcairn Islands.

Please visit our [Expanded Glossary](#) for in-depth definitions of the above terms and definitions of additional terms: **cultural hybridity, dusky maiden, fakaleitī, free association, generational trauma, haka, hapa, Hawaii vs. Hawai‘i, imperialism, māhū, Pacific Islands Forum, Small Island Developing States and tiki culture.**

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A list of the most up-to-date contact information for all of our partner organizations can be found on our website:

[WriteInclusion.org/factsheets](#)

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*“If she can see it, she can be it.”*