

## I Am American by Julie Hayward-Trout

I am the young woman sitting at a table, in the student union pub, at San Jose State University. I was listening to a group of young men go on, and on, about how clever they were while devouring nachos and beer.

One of them turned as I was slowly sipping my diet coke, waiting to hear the free Thursday afternoon acoustic set, "Hey, are you in my Psych class?"

I studied his face with a slight pause, "I don't think so."

"So, what classes are you taking?" I shared a short list of my schedule when he interrupted, "Are you Mexican?" I shook my head no, and wondered if he assumed that because my skin tans so easily, or was it my dark hair, or I wore flip-flops or didn't dress as nicely as the other women on campus.

He became puzzled and asked, "Then, where are you from?"

"I was born and raised in Hawaii."

"Oh, how does it feel to be back in the States?"

I stared at him while taking inventory of other people's responses when I told them I had grown up on Oahu. I had to admit; that was a new one. The usual questions were: "Was your dad in the military?" or, "Did you go to Punahou?," the school where the white kids go. The problem with either of those questions is the assumption that if you're white you had money, or were serving the military presence, and neither of those expectations were true for me.

His questions brought me back to the days when I heard the taunting Haole, which means foreigner, and then back to that day, where I was being labeled Mexican. I do not call myself Hawaiian just because I was born there. I have a profound respect for their sovereignty and; I possess an empathy that runs deep with their loss but, either way world war II ended, the Hawaiian people would lose. It's funny, I was born labeled a "foreigner" in a country I call home.

As I sat there, behind that table filled with young men, that seemed to feel they belonged, and at least one of them not knowing that Hawaii was a part of the United States, I felt as isolated there as I had felt back home. I stopped responding to him, and decided that I was far more attracted to the plate of crunchy, cheesy, jalapeno laden nachos than any of the young men at that table in that moment.

I am American.