

IDA YOSHINAGA

*Pacific (War) Time at Punchbowl:
A Nembutsu for Unclaiming Nation*

*No triumph of peace is quite so great as the supreme
triumph of war.*

—Theodore Roosevelt

*For our Native people, Asian success proves to be but the
latest elaboration of foreign hegemony. The history of our
colonization becomes a twice-told tale, first of discovery and
settlement by European and American businessmen and
missionaries, then of the plantation Japanese, Chinese, and
eventually Filipino rise to dominance in the islands.*

—Haunani-Kay Trask

Pūowaina, the Native Hawaiian name for what American settlers in O‘ahu call Punchbowl crater, is the site of the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific. The official literature on “Punchbowl cemetery” says that over 38,000 US veterans of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War lie buried within the caldera’s grassy grounds.

I grew up partly in Pauoa, a small suburban community nestled in the valley bordering Punchbowl. From a large picture window in the living room of my maternal grandparents’ house, my brother and I would watch the sharp, olive-and-gray profile of the crater change colors during dawn and dusk. My mother, a Honolulu-born-and-bred townie of Japanese ancestry, had told us that this was a popular tourist attraction, second only to Diamond Head among Honolulu’s famous craters. “People from all over the states—I mean, the mainland—know Punchbowl,” she’d say.

Punchbowl is one of two permanent, American cemeteries for World War II soldiers whose families did not request the return of the soldiers’ remains to the continental United States. The other location is the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial in the Philippines. Punchbowl is also one of

two sites for America's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of World War II, where the United States government buried a total of six unidentified US "candidates" who had fought in the war's Pacific and European battles. The other site is the Fort McKinley American Cemetery and Memorial, also in the Philippines.

My maternal grandfather, a second-generation Yamaguchi Prefecture man raised on Hilo Plantation, had moved to Pauoa valley in the 1960s, after his fishing business in urban Kaka'ako accumulated enough money for him to buy a house in the suburbs.

From the onset of Hawai'i's Statehood in 1959, a growing middle class of East Asian settlers and their descendants had purchased property, often with cash, in rural valleys located close to Hawai'i's center of institutional power in downtown Honolulu. As the state's powerful new wave of elected politicians, government bureaucrats, white-collar professionals, and small businessmen, these "local" East Asian settlers had re-zoned generous chunks of countryside from conservation and agricultural lands into marketable property for commercial and residential development. Moving into communities like Pauoa, the settlers would transform what was once Native land into housing tracts for the settlers' now-Americanized, nuclear families.

My grandfather had bought mid-way into the valley, a large lot with banana and mango trees. He had enjoyed the view of Punchbowl, the gentle breezes at night, the coolness of the valley in the early morning.

The United States of America annexed the nations of Hawai'i and the Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century during an expansionist period marked by America's colonization of other island countries: Puerto Rico, Cuba, Sāmoa, Guam. Though the Philippines later gained independence, both it and Hawai'i have, over the last hundred years, been heavily militarized by US forces, which built bases on the prime mountain and ocean-side lands of the islands' indigenous peoples. One marker of colonization is the construction of American national cemeteries on the soil of these peoples, patriotic plots mapping out official versions of the empire's history.

But I have fashioned my family memories within an iron cage of imperial nostalgia, requiring me to ignore the living record of what had been on the land before and what still struggles to remain and resist. Some Native Hawaiian families that had farmed and subsisted in Pauoa for thousands of years were displaced by this orchestrated violence of US economy and law, as East Asian settlers deployed the rules of American commerce to acquire the larger, more desirable lots. As their lands were taken over by the US colonial state and its Asian settler citizens, Native families moved to the lower, more crowded parts of the valley. To neighboring Papakōlea, a working-class, Hawaiian Homestead community, a type of increasingly limited land that had been officially designated for Hawaiians only, ostensibly free from the capitalistic development plans of white, and now Asian, settlers. Other Hawaiian families were pushed to areas above and adjacent to Pauoa on Punchbowl crater's slopes, which were hotter, drier, and less lush than the valley.

Part of the United States' colonization of these island countries, of Hawai'i and other nations, has been the militarization of indigenous lands, their transformation into "public" (colonial state) and "community" (colonial settler) mourning spaces, in patriotic ways that justify the importance of US military presence in the Pacific, Asia, and the Caribbean.

After World War II, for example, the American Battle Monuments Commission erected fourteen permanent military cemeteries (with their own chapels) dedicated to that war, as well as four separate memorials, on foreign soil.

The transformation of Native territory (like Punchbowl) into National Cemeteries and other US servicemen's memorials also helps encourage more working-class and poor Americans to join the US military, seeking exotic overseas adventure and a better life for themselves. The Americans in turn become part of a new colonizing force in other foreign countries. When the soldiers expire in battle or military service, some bodies get shipped back to places like Punchbowl cemetery, helping reinforce and naturalize the encroachment of the American state onto more Native lands. The patriotic romance weaving through the memorials, war maps, mass graves, tombstones, plaques, and other displays at Punchbowl inspires more young men—and now, in the

Middle Eastern campaigns of the two President Bushes, young women—to chance turning into dead bodies for glory of the United States.

Public burials of US veterans are a political act of the state. The rituals and displays encourage visitors to recast the lives of their loved ones within a larger national narrative, erasing any contradictions, including that of the often-unnecessary, real deaths of these veterans. The colonial imagination sees no desecration in one last, symbolic use of cannon fodder.

Native Hawaiian nationalist, activist, and scholar, Haunani-Kay Trask writes about the contemporary meaning of this Hawaiian crater for the families of Native veterans in her poem, “Pūowaina: Flag Day”:¹

Bring ginger, yellow
and white, broken stalks
with glossy leaves.

Bring *lei hulu*,²
palapalai,³ *pikake*.⁴ Bring
kapa,⁵ beaten fine

as skin. Bring
the children
to chant

for our dead,
then stand
with the *lāhui*⁶
and burn
their American
flag.

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On the other side of Punchbowl crater from Pauoa valley lies Roosevelt High School, named after President Theodore Roosevelt. In my mother's time, it was a public institution called an English standard school. Some East Asian kids from the suburbs had once joined the ranks of children of haole (white) settlers here, training in American Standard English, American history, American science, American business. The parents of these Asian children had often savored the fact that this was not a common school, that their children would intermingle with real Americans, not the dark-skinned masses.

*My mom, a regular public school graduate who had been brought up in a working-class, semi-industrial area near downtown, used to say that Roosevelt kids were snobby and “haolefied.”*⁷

In Punchbowl cemetery, beginning at the base of the stairs to the Memorial building and the Court of Honor, ten sets of vertically placed rows of wide granite slabs called the Courts of the Missing list the names of US soldiers lost in action, buried, or drowned at sea in the Pacific from World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. The dead bodies of these 29,000 or so Americans, lives violently extinguished, had not returned to their homes and families, nor had they been retrieved for burial in this cemetery. In many cases, the people waiting at home had not even known the real reasons behind these wars, why the United States military command and Commander-in-Chief had sent their young off to die.

My first image of Teddy Roosevelt, Roosevelt High School’s namesake, came from an illustrated biography that my Japanese grandparents had given me, based on advice from my parents. The American children’s story, which emphasized the man’s lovable, teddy-bear-like toughness and spirited passion for independence, went that Roosevelt had served as Assistant Secretary of the US Navy before the American populace elected him President. The original expansionist rough rider, he had led American troops, and worked behind the scenes, to “liberate” Puerto Rico and Cuba from the Spanish . . . and into US hands. Later, in graduate school, I learned that Roosevelt had been a firm believer that “dominant” nations possessed the right to take over “inferior” ones for the latter’s own good. Brown people from brown nations had to be civilized. As an English standard school, Roosevelt High School had reflected this philosophy.

My uncle, my mother’s younger brother, had married a Roosevelt girl, a Japanese American career woman from a family of doctors. It was a mixed-class marriage, since my uncle came from rough wharfside Kaka’ako and had attended the common schools. But he later made good: as a Korean War veteran with the G.I. bill, he entered New York University for graduate business school, just in time to accompany her on her way to earning a Masters degree in home economics at Columbia University. They returned to the islands and served as minor players in local Asian society: she in the world of media homemaking, becoming a sort of Japanese Martha Stewart, teaching

cohorts of nisei⁸ and sansei⁹ housewives to properly cook casseroles and chicken hekka for their nuclear families; he in the realm of tourism, selling packaged “paradise” dinner shows to white visitors from the US continent. Japanese settlers of this generation played a major part in the prostitution and assimilation of Native Hawaiian culture and people, through the expansion of the tourist industry and through the cultural homogenization of “local” communities, transformations which my family believed in profoundly.

Many Western scholars of global history and politics argue that the United States had entered the Pacific theatre of World War II not to fight for democracy, but rather, to expand its territory into Asia and the Pacific. Even conservative writers admit that after Japan fell, America’s official and actual take-over of diverse island nations in the Pacific Rim had been a pragmatic step towards this goal. Some critics of the United States’ involvement in Korea, Vietnam, and southeast Asia also see these actions as neo-colonial wars, as part of the Cold War, as a struggle between two dominant world powers.



Inscribed along the top edge of Punchbowl’s Memorial building is a list of World War II battles—actually, battles named after island cities, nations, locations, and societies—in which American and Japanese forces had clashed in the Pacific. On the left of the entrance: “Pearl Harbor ★ Wake ★ Coral Sea ★ Midway ★ Attu ★ Solomons ★ Gilberts.” On the right: “Marshalls ★ Marianas ★ Leyte ★ Iwo Jima ★ Okinawa ★ Tokyo ★ Korea.” This list reads like a mapping of US

military presence and colonial possessions over the last century, especially in the five-plus decades since Japan's defeat.

Today, the English standard school v. common school system replaced with the more modern American institutions of private v. public education, Roosevelt is what my young cousins call a state "ghetto school." Its urban populations include Native Hawaiian youths from Papakōlea and Punchbowl, and the children of newly settled wage-earners from Southeast Asia, Polynesia, and Micronesia who rent cheap apartments in Makiki. The middle and upper-middle class East Asian and haole settlers who live in the nicer parts of Pauoa and Makiki tend not to send their children to Roosevelt. They pay for private, college-preparatory schools.

Punchbowl today is a living testimony to American imperialism in the Pacific and Asia. It houses the violently extinguished ghosts of twentieth-century Manifest Destiny. All around the crater lie the living traces of the indigenous civilization of the islands, a civilization whose people struggle to survive amidst (post)modern forms of economic colonization by new "locals" from the American continent and from Asia.

Perhaps the tens of thousands of spirits in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, no longer bound by the fears and illusions of patriotism, would like to return home.

Perhaps they already have.

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Some descriptions of Punchbowl in pre-colonial Hawai'i exist in written English. I do not know if these accounts are true, as they emphasize some things that Americans expect to hear about Native peoples. European and Asian American settlers often translate Powaina as "sacrifice hill," drawing on Western, racist stereotypes of island rituals.

To Americans, when the peoples of other nations "sacrifice" an individual to uphold the group's or community's norms, this is barbaric, this is murder, not a spiritual, moral, or public practice. US veterans, however, are said to make only "necessary" sacrifices for the nation.

Since I live in Makiki, I often walk up to Punchbowl cemetery for exercise. I take the scenic route around the base of the crater, following a road overlooking Pauoa valley. I think of my family, of our time in the islands, of what it means to be American and Asian American and “local” Japanese. And I have questions. What are we all doing here? What purpose do we serve in Hawai‘i?

At the feet of a thirty foot, female-shaped marble relief next to the front entrance of Punchbowl cemetery’s Memorial building, an inscription proclaims:

The solemn pride
That must be yours
To have laid
So costly a sacrifice
On the altar of freedom.



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When settlers read other settlers’ narratives of Hawaiian history, these accounts have already been filtered through the lenses of empire. Inundated by US media and mass culture, American(ized) settlers interpret the stories through quick Western equivalents of complex Native concepts, one-image translations that plug into the commonsensical knowledge of “the Hawaiian.” Perhaps for thirty-something settlers from the nearby continent, “the Hawaiian” comes from recalling the three “evil tabu” *Brady Bunch* episodes set in Hawai‘i back in 1972. Or, for mainlanders in their twenties, from

ogling a wild and drunken Ruthie in MTV's 1998-1999 hit, *Real World Hawai'i*. Earlier waves of haoles from the continent might have reflected on the savage or noble pagans in the "Pacific" narratives of Mark Twain, James Michener, Jack London, Robert Louis Stevenson.

New Japanese settlers and other visitors from East Asia read "the Hawaiian" through Asian versions of the paradise myth. For Japanese travelers, for example, such narratives resemble their ideological counterparts in the United States, offering up iconic images of coconuts, palm trees, sandy beaches, brown "natives" (frequently resembling tanned people of Asian, not Hawaiian, descent, in the tourist literature), timelessly "lazy" cultures and lifestyles, and so on. Other common descriptions differ from American narratives: Hawai'i is often portrayed as "friendly" to Japanese tourists because of its large Asian American, and specifically Japanese-descended, population, who seem closer culturally and linguistically to the Japanese than do Americans in other parts of the States (say, Louisiana or Maine). The de facto Standard English/Standard Japanese bilingualism policy of the Hawai'i tourism industry, evident throughout Waikiki and other major retail districts in the islands, confirms this expectation. In Hawai'i, a moderately curious but risk-averse Japanese national can go abroad, it is said, without feeling as if s/he has left Japan.

These days, the American and Japanese empires are on relatively friendly grounds, sharing more commonalities—as world economic powers and political and military allies—than differences.

What right have I to be here?

In my high school sociology class, I learned about the sacrifices of second-generation Japanese settlers from Hawai'i and the US continent, sacrifices made to America's wars for "freedom" and "justice," especially during World War II, where Japanese Americans were said to have displayed great heroism in the European theatre, proving their citizenship valid and equal to that of whites. We are rarely taught, however, to question the very ground upon which this citizenship rests.

Near the bottom of the stairs, a wide green strip of graves starts, extending for the length of the cemetery away from the Memorial building. At this end of the strip, a bronze book and its bookmark in the form of a bronze torch-bearing hand stick out from a small memorial in the ground. "In October 1944 the 442nd wrote the word 'liberty' with their blood," the memorial's inscription says, referring to a European battle of the celebrated, Japanese-settler-dominated, US Regimental Combat Team.

The displays in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific tell me that I belong in Punchbowl, in Pauoa, in Hawai'i, because of the blood sacrifices my paternal uncles in the 442nd made during World War II. From impressive feats of loyalty such as theirs, the story goes, Japanese settlers as a community earned their place in Hawai'i's political-economic structure and in American history.

"Local" Japanese of my generation can access a ready-made ideological package which locates our group's place in island history, not as settlers of an American colony, but as model-minority success stories saving the free world on the behalf of the United States, and then constructing Hawai'i's current tourism- and military-driven, service economy for the good of everyone.

"We Japanese," my nisei father is fond of saying, "built this place"—as if only the empty, sterilized space of the cosmos had existed before the imin¹⁰ had arrived on Hawai'i's shores.

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A few English-language sources say that in the late 1700s or early 1800s, Punchbowl became the location of battles between several Native chiefs, battles that were said to lead eventually to one ruler's unification of the islands.

Bodies are buried upon bodies in Punchbowl.

My male cousins, raised in Pauoa, did not attend R.L. Stevenson Intermediate or Roosevelt High, both on the slopes of Punchbowl. Instead, they enrolled in Iolani School, a preparatory academy for the mostly East Asian-descended sons and daughters of executives, professionals, and higher-paid government workers. If they choose to stay in the islands rather than become part of a transnational elite of American professionals, these children will someday administer state

and private institutions and oversee the future workers, largely public school attendees or graduates. Iolani competes with Punahou School in training the new ruling class of the islands.

My female cousin, the boys' half-sister, attended Punahou, which sits a few blocks away from Roosevelt, well in sight of Punchbowl crater. A prestigious school originally founded for the children of white missionaries and sugar planters, Punahou today is regarded the top private school on an island where enrollment rates in private K-12 institutions rank among the highest in the country.

Punahou's alumni newsletter often brags about its illustrious graduates, many of whom, such as the founder of America Online, have made it in the continental United States. The local newspapers celebrate these graduates as role models for people raised in the islands, especially for the middle-class, white and Asian settlers that the American national media calls "Hawaiians." But despite its Hawaiian-sounding name, Punahou, for all intents and purposes, is not a Native-serving institution.

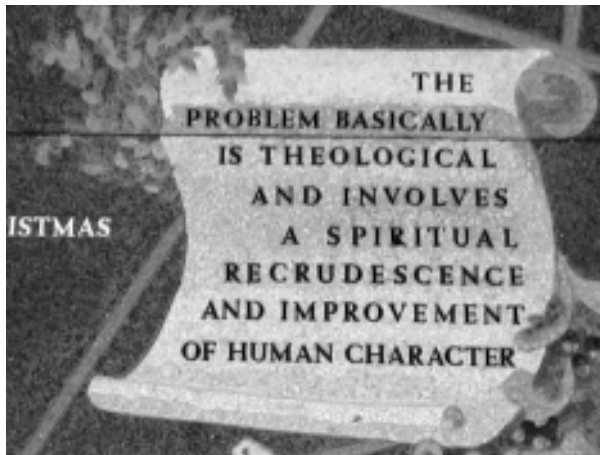
Place names and narratives are layered atop older place names and narratives in and around Punchbowl.

There are no tombs for the missing or unknown among these Hawaiian warriors from two centuries ago. The bulk of the tourist literature on Punchbowl cemetery does not mention these battles.

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Beyond the Memorial's front entrance, inside the building itself, run the Pacific War Galleries, a series of fifteen colorful maps covering wall to wall, with illustrations, arrows, and stories. Most of the maps depict the movements of American and Japanese military forces throughout different parts of the Pacific during World War II. In some of these narratives, US and Japanese casualties of the campaigns are tallied up to see which nation won each round.

As the first map, "Operations in the Pacific 1942-1945," summarizes in a small "scroll" at its lower edges, these battles were not viewed primarily as political, economic, imperial, or even strategic, but as conflicts of essential moral and spiritual character.



Weaned on the tenets of social Darwinism, Americans use this ideology today to excuse and embrace some of the most aggressive, virulent forms of monopoly/oligopoly capitalism in all of world history. We are quite big on victories and “victors.”

Local newspapers also laud the achievements of Iolani kids, largely of Japanese or Chinese descent. Today, there has been some mixing among the upper-middle and upper classes: cliques of Japanese and Chinese kids attend Punahou and groups of haole kids go to Iolani. This racial accounting is perceived as diversity, as multiculturalism, as progress.

In the early 1980s, at my public high school on Maui, the honors and college/professional tracks had been overwhelmingly dominated by Japanese and Chinese settlers, with some haole students also included. In our American school system, few Native Hawaiians had rated highly under the assessment techniques for “cognitive” skills; class and culture biased “ability grouping” methods, such as standardized tests, commonly shunted Native youth off to the vocational (automotive, shop), (lower-level) office work, or “special education” tracks. When I was growing up, the public schools were said to be mostly taught by Japanese women and administered by Japanese men, a pattern I had witnessed throughout my adolescence. Now some of those Japanese men have been replaced by Japanese female or white male administrators, and there exist more haole and Filipinos among the still-Japanese-heavy, teaching rank and file.

It is the diversity of the settler colony: public, as well as private, education, remains dominated by American settlers in Hawai'i.

Today, though I am a half-generation older than my male cousins, we can still drive together through O'ahu's government and commercial districts and count the numerous medium and small businesses, American and global corporations, and state institutions managed or owned by people who had once been our high school classmates. We see bank and real estate advertisements in the media, and the target audience in these commercials—upper-middle class, East-Asian-descended Americans—look astonishingly like us or our peers.

The stories of hundreds of thousands of indigenous islanders who died in the Pacific at the hands of American and Japanese soldiers are nearly completely excluded from the Pacific War Galleries. From their maps and narratives, it seems as if the two opposing imperial forces had fought on empty land, as if only the political interests of America and Japan lay at stake in the Great War.

Near the far end of the Galleries gleams a large, blue diagram of the southwestern Pacific Ocean. A huge eagle with sharp talons perches near the bottom of the illustration, denoting America's "benevolent" influence over this wide body of water and over the peninsulas, islands, and continents it touches.



I am compelled to think about my political coordinates in Hawai‘i. I am making a map of my own, one of unclaiming nation, in order to release my ancestors’ spirits—and mine—from the terrible illusions of this world.

My uncle, the American Korean War veteran, will sleep here in Punchbowl someday.

My father, drafted into the US Army at the end of World War II, will rest in a smaller American veterans’ cemetery on the slopes of Haleakalā on Maui, another colonized crater of deep historical and spiritual significance to Native Hawaiians. Haleakalā has been claimed by the American military’s space industry as part of its research to expand the eagle’s talons towards the stars.

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When I was younger, trying to find my own roots while living in Yokohama, I traveled through northern Honshū with a Japanese co-worker. “Americans have a very cute sense of the historical,” she had said.

Cute?

“A friend from the United States once took me to his state and said I had to see this stone well—one of the most ancient in the Confederate South. When I asked how long it’s been there, he said, ‘It’s 100 years old!’ An historical site just 100 years old; it was so adorable.”

Even young Japanese nationals like my co-worker are aware enough of their own history to know that, in the grand scale of things, 100 years means nothing. For the Native Hawaiian civilization, thriving for millennia, what is a century?

I wonder about Japanese settlers in Hawai‘i, who have lived in the islands for little over a hundred years, sprouting the roots of four to five generations. To many in my community, socialized in this colonial state, this seems like a long time. Long enough to be called “locals,” to stake ownership of the land as ours historically and morally, beyond even the considerable legal, political, and financial claims we’ve already driven into these waters and earth.

We have become very American in a mere century, demanding our share of the spoils of war, invasion, colonization. Like the settlers buried in Punchbowl, we have become imperial soldiers in a brutal and unending battle against the Native “enemy.” We fight our Pacific War for the maintenance of a colonial empire, a war that is daily, ubiquitous, predatory, and neither pacific nor pacifistic.

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The remains of my grandparents and other “local” Japanese American and Japanese-national ancestors—who had come to settle in the islands but who had not served with the US military—lie in lower Pauoa on the slopes of Punchbowl. I visit this memorial on Mother’s Day, O-Bon (the summer festival of ancestral spirits), Christmas, and sometimes, as the New Year opens.

As I offer chrysanthemums and incense, chanting a nembutsu¹¹ uniquely my own, I like to imagine that the spirits of these ancestors have all traveled back to Yamaguchi Prefecture. Back to Ōshima Island, our hometown.

We do not belong here.

The author thanks Eiko Kosasa and Candace Fujikane, on whose written work and thoughtful feedback this essay heavily draws, particularly their analyses in the following articles from Whose Vision? Asian Settler Colonialism in Hawai‘i, a special issue of Amerasia (Vol. 26, No. 2, 2000): “Introduction” (Fujikane) and “Ideological Images: US Nationalism in Japanese Settler Photographs” (Kosasa). Juliana Spahr’s writing about Honolulu’s social geography provided ideas about method and format: 2199 Kalia Road at <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~spahr/waikiki.pdf> and Dole Street at <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~spahr/dolestreet.pdf>. Joy Harjo’s comments on my earlier, clunkier, blues-based aubade inspired a scrapping of the poem and a keeping of its messy liner notes, from which this narrative grew. A 1997 article by Kathy E. Ferguson and Phyllis Turnbull in Women in Hawai‘i: Sites, Identities, & Voices, Social Process in Hawai‘i Vol. 38, helped me re-vision “family” landscapes into militarized and nationalistic ones. The article expanded into a 1998 book by the same authors through the University of Minnesota Press, Oh, Say, Can You See? The Semiotics of the Military in Hawai‘i. Mahalo also to Kathie Kane for noticing what has been hidden in plain sight and for the helpful suggestions. Kenrick Yoshida took most of the photos.

All errors are nonetheless my own and not those of anyone mentioned above.

¹ *This poem and the below five, footnoted and abbreviated definitions of Hawaiian terms are from Trask's second volume of poetry, *Night is a Sharkskin Drum (U of Hawai'i P, Honolulu 2002)*.*

² *Feather lei*

³ *Different types of native fern*

⁴ *Arabian jasmine*

⁵ *Cloth made from pounded bark*

⁶ *People, nation*

⁷ *Racialized as acting or seeming "white"; over-assimilated into white American mainstream culture; or seeking white race and/or class privilege. Sometimes associated with "mainland" behavior.*

⁸ *Second generation Japanese, or the first generation raised in the country of settlement.*

⁹ *Third-generation Japanese, or the second-generation raised in the country of settlement.*

¹⁰ *(Japanese) immigrants.*

¹¹ *Buddhist prayer or chant.*