

HAWAI'I POETRY: A TOUR

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Den, get one commercial about trips to Hawai'i.
'Mom, one day we going go Hawai'i.'
She look at me like I funny kine.
I tell her it's one good idea fo go Hawai'i
cuz everybody can live in grass
shacks and going be fun fo drink da
tropical drinks wit da fruit and umbrella
and stay outside all da time.
She tell me we live in Hawai'i.

(Ann Inoshita, 'TV')

I wish I could quote the whole thing but there are more islands to get on with.

1. Vog day afternoon

On many days in the autumn, when the winds blowing from the Big Island of Hawai'i are strong and Mount Kilauea is coughing, the air over Honolulu becomes suffused with haze. If you broke down the haze into its parts you would find the sulphur dioxide (SO₂) emitted by the volcano, and the long-term residents of the atmosphere – oxygen, water, dust and sunlight. The chemical gauze has traveled 200 miles from Hawai'i to the island of Oahu. On the weather forecast they announce a vog day. People with asthma are advised to stay inside. By

afternoon you might have imbibed enough volcano cocktail to make you dizzy, to make you seem slightly drunk as you walk along the street. This is how the land enters your body.

This is a place where language is the tumultuous result of history.

2. Within days you are kama'aina

What you need to know:

English missionaries arrived in the Hawai'ian islands mid-nineteenth century. Their children, converts to Mammon, established sugar and pineapple plantations where they exploited first indigenous Hawai'ians (Kanaka Maoli) and, later, indentured labour from Japan, China, Korea, the Philippines. Foremen were recruited from Portugal because they were whiter. But England, its empire already creaking with troublesome colonies, didn't want the place. For the United States, however, its budding interventionist policy being exercised against Spain in the Philippines, the islands would make a strategic 'coaling station' (Silva 180). In *Aloha Betrayed*, Noenoe Silva recounts the events of 1890s: the US annexation of Hawai'i and the forced abdication of Ke Ali'i Ai Moku Lili'uokalani: 'she and her most loyal supporters would be executed if she did not' (180). Queen Lili'uokalani was put under house arrest in her own palace, on her own island, in its massive moat of sea, the Pacific Ocean. From there she maintained vigilant written protest and also – a respected musician and composer – wrote many songs, including this lament to the God the English had left behind in their wake:

'O kou aloha nō

Aia i ka lani,

A 'o kou 'oiā'i'o

Hemolele ho'i.

Ko'u noho mihi 'ana

A pa'ahao 'ia,

'O 'oe ku'u lama,

Kou nani, lo'u ko'o.

Your love

Is in heaven

And your truth

So perfect.

I live in sorrow

Imprisoned

You are my light,

Your glory my support.

(Island Fire 6-7)

The Americans moved in boots and all, literally; there are now several military bases on Oahu. In 1959: statehood (Hawai'i as a state is the same age as me), following closely on the heels of Alaska. The local joke goes that Hawai'i held out so they wouldn't have to call the TV show, *Hawai'i Four Nine*. But the possibilities for Hawai'i were not just militaristic; beautiful, warm and part of America, it became the place to go for a romantic, hip, mu'umu'u-clad, Aloha-shirted, slide-guitar kind of holiday. Tourism superseded sugarcane and pineapples as the state's biggest crop.

Now Hawai'i sells the right to lie on its beaches, to swim in its surf, to walk on its volcanoes, and to watch tropical fish on a coral reef; it sells good food, sweet drinks and weddings. The perception is that everyone in Hawai'i who is not defending America lives a life of leisure and, if not luxury, plenty. (In my experience, the reverse seems to be true; there is an entrenched work ethic.) In her poem 'Host Culture (Guava Juice on a Tray)' Māhealani Kamau'u makes an absurdity of the notion of the holiday state:

They act like
They was invited –
Like all these years,
We been partying
Or something...

(*Whetu Moana* 96)

A population breakdown of the million inhabitants of the islands according to ethnicity roughly divides a pie into a quarter Japanese, a quarter Haole (white), a fifth Hawai'ian, and the rest Chinese, Filipino and Portuguese. People often use the homogenising term 'melting pot' to describe the complexity of racial groups, subgroups and cross-groups that make up Hawai'i.

I thought the sign in the market place, 'No nos,' was referring to a Japanese restaurant. We had been here three days. We had a phone number and a connection notice from the Hawai'ian Electric Company. We were officially kama'aina, i.e. 'local.' Not really; it's complicated. But in terms of getting to see the tropical fish at Haunama Bay for free, we were kama'aina, indistinguishable from Kanaka Maoli, from the descendants of English Missionaries (not Local, because white), the descendants of plantation workers (Local), the descendants of plantation bosses (also Local), the children of Japanese and Chinese merchants

who arrived in the 20s (Local), from white hippies who came from the mainland in the 60s (not Local, Haole). In Hawai'i they are very generous with the term, kama'aina. I am kama'aina but I cannot read the signs. After about the tenth time of looking at the sign, 'No nos,' I noticed the list beneath it:

No nos:
cycling
rollerskating
rollerblading
skateboarding

I had thought it was a restaurant. Does that mean it is a poem? A free tanka.

Hawai'i shades its eyes against the usual dismal story of colonisation. Hawai'ians are less than 0.1% percent of the US population, with all that figure's attendant suffering. The landslide of immigration has happened within living memory. As if to hold onto a homeland, Hawai'ian poets engage with the land. Haunani-Kay Trask is most famous for her work on Hawai'ian sovereignty, *From a Native Daughter*. In her poetry collection, *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, she writes like a volcanic chain:

To write by moonlight,

mai'a leaves, the green
ink of night;
(Trask 50)

and in 'Nostalgia: VJ-Day':

A wounded morning
crippled by helicopters.
No bullet-proof skies
over our 'Hawai'ian islands'
(Trask 21).

The connection of landscape, myth and destruction also occupies the thematic territory of younger Hawai'ian poets. In 'laundry day sestina' Ku'ualoha Ho'omanawanui juxtaposes the sublime and the banal:

The watercolour sunset sky is gold and pink against a gray wash
and as the sun slants through the drizzle, I wait
but no rainbow comes. I head home, hair covered with a towel.

(Whetu Moana 73)

The land makes its presence felt in the work of both Trask and Ho'omanawanui. This preoccupation is both historical and utterly contemporary, not only politically and socially but in the weather, in volcanic movement. There are eruptions on the big island of Hawai'i, earthquakes, heavy rain, erosion. On the first of every month at 11.45am, a tsunami warning horn sounds over the whole of Honolulu. Practice, a dummy run, just in case. There's a sense of exciting volatility in the very land on a daily basis, coupled with clear evidence of ancient geological activity. This curious juxtaposition between volatility and antiquity is summoned in Brandy McDougall's 'The Petroglyphs at Olowalu' in which the caves have:

...outlived the hands who
pressed the lines of ghosts into the cliff-face:

stiff triangular figures, broad-shouldered,
ancient men, women and children who climb

or fall against the pali wall, buffered
by ocean wind, the salt carried through time.

Tracing the lines those before me began –
their words I ask for, the long work of hands.

(Whetu Moana 124)

Where McDougall attends, in this poem, to the islands as they were before words got to them, there is much literature focused on what has become of the done-over land. The devastation has been enormous, and quite recent – elders remember childhoods of cultivation, fishing and shell-fish-gathering. The destruction is still going on. Plans are afoot, for instance, to build

five hotels at one of the few relatively undeveloped stretches of coastline, Turtle Bay. In 'Da Last Squid' Joe Balaz laments the desecration dealt by the tunnels the military bored through the island of Oahu (where Honolulu is):

By den
had so many adah tunnels too,
dat da mountain
wen look like wun honeycomb.

(*Whetu Moana* 10)

We can read Balaz's poem like the news (or misread it as the news). This interpretative interface, of bearing witness, of telling, carries much of the strength and immediacy of Kanaka Maoli poetry. The thread of newsworthiness seems to stem from two circumstances; one, the relatively small scale of the community opens up the possibility of a real association to be made through poetry, not just a virtual or written one – the reader is likely to know the world of the writer (the same is true for Aotearoa); but even more importantly, Kanaka Maoli poets have a vital engagement with the colonial past and the neo-colonial present. In Hawai'ian poetry, one could argue, there is neither the luxury nor the necessity of feeding off the language. Aboutness is all about. Joe Balaz can use a real voice to tell us of a real event.

3. Three-D

On a Saturday night, bars reverberate with Slam. There's a big High School Slam competition every year. There's a raft of spoken word CDs, put together by Joe Balaz, Richard Hamasaki, Jozuf Bradajo Hadley, and many others. There are poetry festivals. The first Hawai'i Book & Music Festival, held in May 2006, floated back and forth between tents and the Honolulu Hale (the town hall). Other festivals include The Fall Festival of Writers at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, the Bamboo Ridge 'Try Write' festivals, the 'Write in the Middle' festival for young teenagers and the Maui Writers' Festival where literary agents from the mainland and hopeful writers flock. These festivals bring poetry out of silence and into the community in a way that is possible here because there still *is* community.

A tradition of chant has of course always been in residence on these islands. Hula continue to be composed and performed on a large scale. Hawai'i stands still for the annual Hula Competitions, apart from the dancers.

Popular island music goes way back to the shimmying blends of slide-guitar, country, Hawai'ian songs. Island reggae is these days broadcast almost wall-to-wall on student radio, with a lot of lyrics that go something like 'Let's go surf,' sung to an uplifting tune.

Surfing songs, hula, slam: they orbit. But I am a tourist of the page, as if on a bus tour over the surface of the island.

4. I love one language

What else you need to know:

The hot history of Hawai'ian Creole English (HCE). It was fitted together from the borders of several languages – the English of the missionaries and plantation owners, the Hawai'ian of the first workers on the plantations, the Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos and Koreans of the indentured labour force. If you have ever walked through a field of sugar cane at midday in the tropics, you might have some inkling of the conditions the workers suffered. The sugar seems about to caramelize in the heat. In these natural hothouses, the workers would squat down in the shade to 'talk story,' quietly, in case the bosses heard. Among the languages, they looked for common ground, highlighted sameness, discarded differences. In this way, from the accumulated and rearranged cells of other languages, Pidgin was fashioned, a new conglomerate, complex and pared down at the same time. This was the language that needed to be made, fast, out of necessity, an ingenious invention and a triumph over adversity. It was and is an essentially practical language, useful the way bowls, pipes and seams are useful and beautiful. In the plantations of Hawai'i in the late nineteenth century, a language grew that is post-modern in the purest sense.

In the opening poem of this essay, Ann Inoshita addresses the issue of confusion about place – 'where are we?' To make her point, she uses the very Creole devised to articulate, decisively and deliberately, 'where we are.' It's not surprising that one of the great strengths of Pidgin is its clarity; it was devised for clarity under confusing conditions. When Ann Inoshita writes, 'She look at me like I funny kine...' the poem changes gear and admits the notion of doubt to the reader. It cleverly juxtaposes the quintessential Pidgin word 'kine' with

the knowledge of the mother, who by association is the author of the word 'kine' but knows it exists beside the gloss of tourism.

There appears to be a school of Pidgin writers (who in this instance are Local rather than indigenous) who look past the beauty of the landscape, who *write* past the beauty of the landscape, and for whom Pidgin is a suspension in which states of mind, racial politics, gender issues are floated. There is a sense that, just as the original workers had little time to converse, there is little time to admire the view. There is so much to say about the complicated patterning of Hawai'i society.

One of the complications is that, despite the widespread use of spoken Pidgin in Hawai'i, Standard English is the desired language of schools, business, public affairs; the spoken language is, ideally, not to be spoken, and certainly not to be written. (Older New Zealanders may understand something of this from being told as children to expunge their own accent, not to speak the way they spoke.) Perversely, or perhaps nostalgically, in Hawai'i they use the term 'talk story' (which surely sums up the roots of Pidgin) in the news media; the Mayor says talk story; almost every conference, symposium or gathering has, at some point, talk story. Talk story in this context is a reliquary.

But Pidgin will not stay neatly in its reliquary. It bursts out, spoken. And now spoken is also written. Spoken/written negotiate the space between them. What is poetry, if not this, and is not a poet aware of how this language interface ripples into a poem's intent?

And: Standard English can ignore everything around it, but Pidgin has to take on Standard English as its opponent. Is this a definition of poetry?

Just went pee after putting down a phone
found a toothbrush abandoned ina sink
white mush dissolving downa drain
I forgot, left um there when a phone rang fourth time before 9 a.m.
rapping to Lois about mental illness
when da odda phone rang – (Lois on hold)
while anodda order fo' her book came, from Amherst...

(Chock, 'The Best of Bamboo Ridge' 20)

Eric Chock is an editor of *Bamboo Ridge*, one of the main literary journals along with *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *Hawai'i Review*, *Mānoa* and *Tinfish Journal*. There is often this

playfulness in Pidgin poetry. A stance. Heck, Pidgin was banned in schools (still is); now they're reading it on the mainland! Who's the joke on?

The 'Lois' of Chock's poem is Lois-Ann Yamanaka, the Pidgin queen. She took Pidgin to the mainland. In *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theater* she reports:

Richard wen' call me around 9.05 last night.
Nah, I talk *real* nice to him.
Tink I talk to him the way I talk to you?
You cannot let boys know your true self.
(‘Tita: Boyfriends’ 41)

And you can't let anyone else know either.

My madda she very mad at me today
because I answer her back with a sassy mouth.
She punch um with her big ring
so she no need hear me talk no mo.
(‘Haupu Mountain’ 94)

Yamanaka portrays violence at every level: family, gender-based, societal. Her characters are often young girls viewed by men (and women) as vixens. The portrayal of violence in the work of such Maori writers as Keri Hulme, Alan Duff and Patricia Grace has often associated violence with redemption. In contrast, Yamanaka simply presents it as a fact. We can read this like the news. She is not looking for reasons, answers or absolution. What you read in this is acceptance and love of a culture with all its flaws. Her work is skilled, and double-edged. On the one hand she is portraying a troubled, inward-looking culture, but on the other, she plasters HCE at the centre of the page, where it was once not welcome.

Yamanaka's young characters perhaps point to the newness of the culture to these islands. The first Japanese arrived in 1862. At the same time she challenges the notion of the melting pot. There is careful attention paid to exactly where you came from, as in the poem, 'Kala Gave Me Anykine Advice Especially About Filipinos When I Moved to Pahala.' Yamanaka's portrayal of Filipinos so incensed the Filipino community that she was divested of an Association of Asian Studies award she had been given for her novel, *Blu's Hanging*.

From the other side of the fence, Juliana Spahr (Haole, now non-resident) in *Fuck-You-Aloha-I love You*, writes *about* the language she hears around her, shifting from voice to voice, and portraying a struggle, a desire to get it: 'I am trying to tell about things,/about da kine' (15).

One champion of Pidgin is Lisa Linn Kana'e, who joins Yamanaka in summoning the domestic:

At firs my madda was supa worried dat Harold-Boy neva start talking da
same time as me and my cousin dem. Now she stay mo worried, becausehe no can
talk like everybody else. But, not like everybody in dis house talk good English.
My madda, she every time tell me, 'you not going get one good job if you no can
talk good English. People going tink you stupid.'

(Kana'e 14)

Another is Lee Tonouchi, the 'Pidgin Guerilla.' Tonouchi is perhaps the most media-savvy activist in the Pidgin cause, using community theatre and local newspapers as his organs rather than academia. It's an important distinction. The university press is only going to reach so many Pidgin speakers. Tonouchi errs on the non-serious approach to Pidgin. His *Da Kine Dictionary: Da Hawai'i Community Pidgin Dictionary Projeck*, which burst onto the scene in 2005, includes photographs of Pidgin speakers hamming it up, and each entry is accompanied by a jokey contextualising sentence:

'**kamaboko slippahs** High kine slippahs. *My aunty Dale always wea kamaboko slippahs for make her look taller'*

(Tonouchi 50).

(Slippers is the Local word for jandals or thongs.)

And:

'**sukoshi** Little bit. *Karen is sukoshi kine forgetful, az why she cannot find her keys.: Japanese'*

(Tonouchi 84).

If the poets are taking Pidgin more seriously, the work of getting Pidgin out there is still important. Poetry and fiction are arguably the only written territories to be gained by Pidgin, which is still not welcome in schools or universities. HCE is not recognised officially in any capacity. The flowering of Pidgin poetry and fiction breaks the print silence that for three

generations has been imposed on Pidgin. In Hawai'i, Pidgin poetry is not just accepted, it is (because literature thrives on the new) a happening thing. The work of Lois-Ann Yamanaka (of the phone-call from Amherst) and others has made inroads on the canon in the way plate tectonics formed these islands, incurring landslides of language, upheavals of intent.

Pidgin in poetry constantly negotiates the brink between the written and spoken. It pins down the received wisdom of the spoken cliché, and embraces the issue of how we see ourselves, immersing us in the haze of suppositions about place, race and history. Hasn't this always been the business of poetry? Pidgin couches these concerns in a language that *should not be on the page*. But is!

Susan Schultz (wearing her academic hat) makes the point in *A Poetics of Impasse in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (160) that Pidgin has relocated from the spoken:

It is the sound of Pidgin, the resonance of its shared cultural references rather than its presence on the page, which is most different from standard English. It is also this sound of Pidgin that breaks a silence long enforced on Pidgin speakers.

But conversely, the place where Pidgin differs from *American* English is emphasised by the written word. One of my students said in class one day that she found it hard to write in Pidgin although she grew up speaking it, because 'you have to think up new ways to write normal words.' There was a chorus of agreement among the other students, who elaborated on the subject: 'It sounds different and you have to write it sounding different.' The burden, it seems, for Pidgin writers, is to locate the difference between how Pidgin sounds and how Standard American English sounds, and to be constantly inventive in transcribing this difference to paper. One of the key differences in pronunciation between Pidgin and Standard American English is that the former doesn't roll the 'r.' This seems a simple distinction, and certainly one that, as a New Zealander not rolling my 'r's, I never have to think about. I wondered how it would be to rewrite the whole of Commonwealth poetry (which generally doesn't roll its 'r's but elides its 'l's) phonetically, taking into account its difference from American Standard English, and to start with, for want of a better place, Tennyson:

The splenda fawls on cahsil waw-ls
And snowy summits aw-ld in staw-ry:

It took me ages to write that. I had to think up new ways to write normal words.

The notating of Pidgin in Hawai'i is a comparatively recent phenomenon; a kind of fast-forwarding has occurred. The process has had to take into account the dominant written language that had already asserted itself and continues to do so. It seems that the result of this positioning against written Standard American English is that written Pidgin, 'correcting' its pronunciation as well as its grammar, ends up looking 'moa different,' to coin a Pidgin phrase, than it might otherwise. Pidgin writers for the page are in an interesting and challenging position, but one that allows them a marked stamp of identity.

5. An archipelago in form

The simplicity and economy of small forms recur in the work of many Local writers, from Haunani-Kay Trask to Caroline Sinaviana-Gabbard to Richard Hamasaki to Cathy Song. Poetry in nugget form (haiku, tanka) works at a linguistic juxtaposition between language (English) and form (Japanese). 'English' literary forms are not part of the cultural history of this place. Caroline Sinavaiana-Gabbard uses a series of haiku in several of the poems in her book, *Alchemies of Distance*, including 'pilgrimage':

waile'a roadway –
 fragrance of drunken guava
 at your feet.

(Sinavaiana-Gabbard 77)

Many poets use haiku and tanka as templates from which they depart into free-form. In an early poem called 'Chinatown,' Cathy Song writes of the pain of immigration using the language and form that spells her distance from an original home

3
 First question
 Can it be eaten?
 If not, what good
 is it, is anything?

4
 She sends the children
 up for air.
 Sip it like tea.

(*Island Fire* 207-08)

6. A small note on lyricism

When you regard these islands, which really are verdant, amid their sea which really is azure, and with their cliffs which really are pleated, and above it all, the night sky (at night) which really is velvety, you can see the impetus for lyricism. When you see the clustering high-rises and the welter of freeways, and read in the news about plans for more holiday resorts, you can witness the importance of salvaging not only the landscape but its accompanying lyric. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, writing on *citylights.com*, makes the rather grand statement that: ‘Pure lyricism is not dead. Except in America.’ This could be true, but of course, Ferlinghetti is referring only to the mainland. Generally, people don’t consider Hawai’i, and that is why lyricism is still alive here. Ferlinghetti goes on to opine that the further people get from nature, the less lyrical poetry becomes. In Hawai’i, nature, although endangered, is still extant. The point might be made that ‘nature’ exists all over the globe. But in Hawai’i the history of the devastation of nature is recent (Hawai’i, for instance, has the largest number of endangered species in the world) and the destruction of the indigenous flora and fauna so imminent, that it is of course inseparable from the political situation for Kanaka Maoli.

There is (therefore, it seems to me) a noticeable vein of lyricism here, pulsing with what the reader might view as reality. The lyric is identifiable in the work of many of the poets mentioned so far: Haunani-Kay Trask, Ku’ualoha Ho’omanawanui, Brandy McDougall, and in the Pidgin poems of Joe Balaz and Eric Kwok. These writers present an emotional engagement with landscape, and with the narratives of the past and present. They are not, in general, so concerned with tricks of the language; rather, with aboutness. Poets here have a complex and recent history of land, language and ethnicity issues that appear to require attention. The reason, perhaps, that the lyric is not, as Ferlinghetti states about the mainland, dead, is that the battle against destruction is not over.

Against a backdrop of encroaching urbanisation, a poem by Brandy McDougall can contain the often-used emblems of the landscape – flowers – within its lines:

...carrying the unstrung lei
we made for you this morning,
little white buds of plumeria, gardenia

(*Whetu Moana* 122).

A walk through the Kanaka Maoli literary journal 'Ōiwi shows writers celebrating and lamenting the land and the way of life associated with it. R. Kaleinani Keli'ipule'ole-Aki in her poem 'By the Way of the Moon' recounts in twelve chants, the customs which are often viewed by non-Kanaka Maoli as ancient, but are contemporary: 'By the way of the moon/I fish and plant.' 'By the way of moon/I pray' ('Ōiwi 28). Kahi Brooks in 'Ho'i Hou I ka Mole' addresses a different mode of contemporaneity by asking: 'Would they see me/pale, blue jeans, Frappacino/and find me more foreign than haole./My ford more strange than *Endeavor*' ('Ōiwi 150).

In her introduction to her poems, also in 'Ōiwi, Sarah Daniels paraphrases a nameless writer: 'I once heard a visionary Hawaiian writer I admire very much say, 'E, I no writer because I like "become one better writer," I writer because I piss off!' ('Ōiwi 169).

The lyric keeps coming, a kind of wave not just to describe and honour the land and its associations, but to tell and lament how it was and how it is.

7. Here/away

There's a sense where some Haole writers are like migratory birds, returning via their poetry to the mainland on a seasonal basis, or that Hawai'i is a dormitory suburb for mainland poets. When W. S. Merwin read at the University of Hawai'i in March 2006 people stood outside the auditorium hoping to catch a phrase or two. Merwin's tour de force, *The Folding Cliffs*, which tells in a meaty 300-plus-page poem the story of American aggression towards Hawai'ian leprosy victims, is breathless in its desire to narrate:

39.

– They listened and then the flute stopped and they waited
and then they went back to playing but listening
and did not hear it again but a few nights later
when they stopped what they were playing to play it over
they heard the flute again and it went on playing
where they had stopped and Mr Ewart put down his violin
and opened the door onto the long lanai and the flute...

(Merwin 322)

This work could be equated with Merwin's translation of Dante's *Purgatorio* in its intent (to re-plough the great stories of the planet?) were it not for the political scenario for Hawai'ians which exists in stark reality as soon as you step outside the text. In this context *The Folding Cliffs* looks like property bought for a song in the absence of ancestral land; a real story told in the absence of one's own.

Juliana Spahr, writing on the border of prose and poetry, delves into White issues of place that slosh in the watery border between Hawai'i and the phantom mainland. In her forthcoming book, *A Transformation*, Spahr relates in almost microscopic detail (appropriating, for this instance, a critical/informative voice) the aboutness of ethnicity and language here. The 'they' in this excerpt seems to refer to ex-mainland Haole writers, a category Spahr herself fell into for a time.

This issue of the expansionist language was not the only pressure on writing. There was also the risk of appropriation, another sort of cultural bomb. It was clear to them that there was such a long tradition of appropriation that anything they might say they would have to say sideways, have to say by doing more burrowing, negotiating, resisting, localizing, and refusing. One unfortunate result of the infection that they had was that it was hard for them to see anything with any nuance. They saw their options only as the one or the other. The island had played a large role in the literary and filmic imaginaries of the culture that currently occupied the continent that now claimed the island. In this imaginary, the island was a welcoming multicultural paradise filled with beautiful young women and wise old people who did not ask for much and shared their land and food and culture and even welcomed their colonizers as civilizers. These were stories the colonizers told to tell how they were welcomed. They did not want to write things like this. But the other response that they saw when they looked around them, the response of some who were like them from afar, was to ignore the island and build a bunker. This did not feel right either. It was clear that there were no easy answers to any of this and it was also clear that more than one answer was probably necessary. Yet whenever another one presented itself, they tended to distrust it and so they were caught rejecting every answer and thus never able to accumulate more than one answer.

The phenomenon of the angst plenty leaves you with has long been a predominant theme for white Americans, who instead of engaging with aboutness, feast on the language itself. Susan

Schultz (wearing her poetry hat) in ‘Another Childhood’ from *And then Something Happened* places the poem at the centre of its own small maelstrom (7):

And what if the poem actually is
the cause of our confusion, not outlet
or even inlay, the taut mosaic
of a million tiles that absorbs logic
like a sponge?

These poets might be called experimental if all of poetry wasn’t an experiment.

8. What passes between

At a recent symposium on translation held at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, I heard Gayatri Spivak say that the ideal of translation is ‘to know both languages so well that love can pass between them.’ This notion of translation being a beneficial exchange is something that has been consciously explored in Hawai‘i literature – which itself could be read as an extension of a wider intent in the community.

The connection with Asia is close and complex, both contemporaneously and historically. Consider the situation third-generation Japanese-Americans found themselves in in Hawai‘i, 1941, when Pearl Harbour was torpedoed by the Japanese, and then again in 1945 at the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many local Japanese were interned during the war years.

In 1995 Bamboo Ridge dedicated an issue of *The Hawai‘i Writers Quarterly* to translations of tanka from the Japanese on the subject of the infamous atomic bombs. *Outcry From the Inferno* constitutes five-line representations of almost unimaginable atrocity. Shinoe Shoda’s ‘Tanka’:

The large skull
is the teacher’s.
Gathered
around it,
smaller skulls.

(*Outcry* 74)

Local journals often feature translations from Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese. Tinfish Press in particular (the quick change artist Susan Schultz in her publisher guise) has brought out several books in translation, including poems from Ho Chi Minh's prison diaries.

There's also an identifiable presence of Asian writers working in English and dealing with the interface of the languages as their subject-matter. Tinfish author Yunte Huang was born in China but now lives and teaches in California. In his poem 'For MIA, Made in America: A Song of Love That Goes Nowhere,' Huang uncovers mysteries held within the semantics of his second language, English:

I am
the bell of your belly
nip of your nipple
yes in your eyes
no in your nose
should on your shoulder
so in your torso.

(Huang 12)

If the act of translation in Hawai'i brings up issues of exchange and authenticity, it also reflects the linguistic volatility of a place that has for over a hundred years been a crossroads of culture and ethnicity.

9. Silent auction in Chinatown

One Friday night in Chinatown there was a silent auction to raise money to publish a book of poetry by the late Wayne Kaumuali'i Westlake. The book had been accepted by University of Hawai'i Press – someone just needed to raise the money. The auction was the initiative of the Westlake collection's editor, Richard Hamasaki. People had donated objects, mostly books and artworks. The package my husband bid for contained two books and a T-shirt. Hidden in between the two books was a little gem of a chapbook, *It's Okay If You Eat Lots of Rice*, by none other than Wayne Westlake, with woodcuts, published in California in 1979:

Read a whole
book on brain
damage - -

think
I got some.

(Westlake 29)

Remember this place is one stop from San Francisco. There are beats who are beats in the way South Auckland rappers are rappers. The emphasis is very much on here, the rhythms, like the guitar (which came with the Portuguese), adaptations. Wayne Westlake has become a cult figure. His work always has a backdrop of the catastrophe that is tourism, as in ‘NamuAmidaButsu’:

‘That’s it, Roach!
off you go, down the toilet
to Paradise! ’

(Westlake 11)

Richard Hamasaki likewise addresses the homeless problem in Hawai’i in *The Spiderbone Diaries* :

walking home
with another letter
evicting me.

(Hamasaki 6)

Visitors say people here are friendly. There is a low crime rate. And people will gather on a Friday night in Chinatown to raise money for the publication of a book.

10. Visitors galore

This strategic jewel, this militaristic loveliness – what trouble it got Hawai’i into! If only it had been ugly, landlocked, freezing.

No more sugar, no more pineapples, but tourists. In a tourist economy, nothing is safe from entombment. The landscape is on a small scale here, though it is big as iconography. Waikiki,

for example, is unavailable to be called upon except as an emblem of a certain pillaging. But it is what poets do with this enshrinement that matters. Haunani-Kay Trask in an early poem, 'People of the Earth,' fuses the ideas of intermarriage (the 'melting pot') and the Marine Corps' whitening of the waves.

Ocean people
grow ghostlike
in the wake
of nuclear seas.

(*Mālama* 141)

The underside to the tourist industry is the army of low-paid 'hospitality' workers. Students often work these after-hours jobs, which are dirty and interminable. (I was told, never complain about food in a restaurant because they will spit in it and bring it back.) John Zuern attends to the ugly, despairing side of the tourist coin in his online kinetic image-text, 'ask me for the moon: working nights in Waikiki.'

step out to look at the moon
this is what you see
reef of spent muscle
secretion of hope and work

(Zuern)

The students are the lucky ones. The permanent workforce that runs the tourist industry is the new indentured labour. Wayne Westlake's 'Down on the Sidewalk in Waikiki' claims a kind of high ground back in recompense. The poem has become a classic.

No need feel sorry
for the crippled man
down on the sidewalk
in Waikiki –

There are a lot more crippled
minds
limping around,
feel sorry for them!

(*Mālama* 106)

Poets like having beach holidays too. They visit. They do gigs at the university. They don't sell out the Blaisdell Centre (where Mick Jagger performs) but people in poetry circles flock to see them. Ted Koosner visited at the beginning of 2007. In the last couple of years there have been visits from Martin Espada, the Puerto Rican poet from New York, Ishmael Reed, Maxine Hong Kingston, Michelle Cliff. In 1989 Michael Ondaatje had the job I have now! There's Joy Harjo, the sax-playing and nationally recognised poet, who visited and stayed on.

And a procession from Aotearoa. (They think we're a model society. They think that socially we're like Sweden. Every time I hear New Zealand praised I imagine a land filled with blonde furniture and I feel slightly embarrassed.) They invite New Zealanders over: Albert Wendt, John Pule, Tusiata Avia, Sia Figiel, Robert Sullivan. And well, me, but only as a tourist.

11. Reading all the lines of the tanka

Three-and-a-half years since misunderstanding the 'No-nos' sign in the marketplace, I have read and misread over and over again the words around me. I am perhaps more kama'aina than I was at the beginning. I have been exposed to new ways of speaking/writing and have learned to love them. I am still skimming the surface of the poetry here, which is layered like volcano sand. The proliferation of literary journals speaks of the enthusiasm for poetry, and displays the extraordinary range of voices. I keep discovering new writers.

I have also realised that one of the great things about Hawai'i poetry (and this it shares with Aotearoa) is that poets here can be published and read by their own community. This is something that doesn't happen so readily in bigger places. And, I would venture to guess, happens less in a place where language comes in monochrome.

When a group of people will get together to raise money to publish a book of poetry that *should be paid* for by a press, you have local poetry.

When poetry is no longer misread as the news by anyone, there is no longer local poetry. Sage Takehiro, in 'WhatStonersThink' talks (writes) about, among other things, the pertinent issue

of the precious land. I guarantee many readers of the poem below will shake their fist in agreement, as if reading the news. Knowing the story, I almost do it myself now.

You wish you had one job at Wal-Mart
Bitch, nex time buy yoah own damn weed --
Eh, iz not my fault you married to one broke ass Haole
half rich, half pua, no can pay rent, no can qualify fo' couny housing.
Shit, mo bettah marry one half Hawai'ian
at leas' dey put chu on da waiting lis'!

(Takehiro)

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