MIGRATION AND THE POLITICS OF SOVEREIGNTY, SETTLEMENT, AND BELONGING IN HAWAI'I

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This essay explores ways that migrations to and from Hawai‘i shaped and were shaped by the Atlantic and Pacific contexts and questions of “who was to keep sovereignty, who was to rule, and who was to be ruled” in Hawai‘i.1 The first section focuses on the history of migration and politics of sovereignty, settlement, and belonging in between the 1780s, when Hawai‘i became a key crossroads to and through which peoples from around the Atlantic and Pacific circulated, and the 1930s, when most migration to and from Hawai‘i came to a virtual standstill. The second presents preliminary findings on how ideas about the potential of Portuguese and Japanese immigrants to become settlers and citizens of Hawai‘i and Brazil circulated in the Atlantic and Pacific between the 1870s and 1910s. It situates local struggles between agents of Hawaiian nationhood and U.S. imperialism in the context of global processes of emancipation, high imperialism, mass migration, and industrialization of manufacturing, mining, and agriculture. The final section suggests how current debates over sovereignty, settlement, and belonging are transforming Hawaiian historiography and its potential contributions to studies of the Atlantic and Pacific worlds that Hawai‘i and Hawaiians helped connect.

Atlantic and Pacific Crossings: The Circulation and Settlement of People, 1780s–1930s

During the first sizable migration between the 1780s and the 1860s, Hawai‘i developed into a key node of the emergent global capitalist economy and a sovereign nation. It did so both because of and despite post-contact transformations, most famously and tragically, demographic devastation. Mass death and infertility resulting from

introduced diseases, the attendant socio-economic dislocations and politico-cultural upheavals, and missionary-led efforts at cultural erasure reduced the pre-contact population of upwards of 300,000 by fifty percent by the mid-nineteenth century and ninety percent at that century’s end.² Contrary to fatal impact accounts, native ali‘i (chiefs) and maka‘āinana (commoners) decidedly and decisively shaped Hawai‘i’s development into a modern nation state and linked it to Atlantic and Pacific worlds.³

During this period, diverse peoples from the Americas, Asia, Europe, Oceania, and elsewhere circulated around and across Hawai‘i and the Pacific, but only a few settled. Euro-American captains traded furs from the Pacific Northwest and sandalwood from Hawai‘i to China. Sailors from all over the world manned ships, which re-provisioned and re-created their crews in Hawai‘i. Captains of mostly New England whalers relied on Hawaiians for upwards of one-fifth of their sailors, and Hawai‘i was a winter haven for six-sevenths of the fleet.⁴ Euro-Americans valued Hawaiians for their navigation, sailing, and swimming skills. From Alaska to California, they relied on Hawaiians to conduct trade with native Americans, conquer territory, defend white colonists, and perform drudge labor. Some Hawaiians stayed and married native Americans and Alaskans, wherein lie the roots of the popular Hawaiian dish, lomi salmon, made from salt salmon, tomatoes, and onions that reached Hawai‘i as a result of the fur trade. U.S. missionaries recruited Hawaiians to win converts in Micronesia, Polynesia, and the Pacific West. Hawaiian-grown provisions fed the miners who rushed to California’s gold fields from all parts of the Atlantic and Pacific.⁵ Of the almost 2,100 foreigners in Hawai‘i in


