Aloha, Vietnam: Race and Empire in Hawai‘i’s Vietnam War
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“Kara Village” sits in the middle of O‘ahu Island in the Ko‘olau Mountains, far from the beaches and sites of leisure that defined Hawai‘i “paradise” to Americans in the 1960s. Fortified by lush, rugged terrain and peopled by so-called natives, the place elicits little to no mention in most historical accounts of Hawai‘i poststatehood. It was not visible on tourist maps at the time it existed in the 1960s and was inaccessible to most residents and visitors to the island. It was, simply put, a place obscured in “paradise” or, in the words of Kathy Ferguson and Phyllis Turnbull, “hidden in plain sight.” Yet, despite its obscurity in the cultural geography of Hawai‘i, Kara Village was in another respect a pivotal access to the Pacific world, a world that, at least according to the US Army’s version of it, was filled with unfamiliar and hostile environments that required the blunt force of US counterinsurgency to tame.

It is well known that Hawai‘i served as a staging area for the US military during the Vietnam War, but less is known about the practices of war making that took place on the islands during this time. From the mid- to late 1960s, Kara Village was the place where soldiers received their advance infantry training before going to war. It occupied the East Range of Schofield Barracks, distinguished from the rest of the army compound by makeshift huts, booby traps, and “Viet Cong insurgents,” who more often than not were played by Native Hawaiian and Asian American GIs. Kara Village was a fiction of the US military imagination, a “native” place intended to mimic the sites of war an ocean away, to render the unfamiliar terrains of Southeast Asia knowable and actionable. As a laboratory of war making, it collapsed the distinction between Hawai‘i and Vietnam and made them interchangeable sites of war.

This essay seeks to explain Hawai‘i’s obscured centrality to the US war in Vietnam partly by making visible such military practices “hidden in plain sight.” More than just a historical account of Hawai‘i’s militarization in the 1960s, however, the essay approaches “Hawai‘i’s Vietnam War” as a broader inquiry about the mutual formations of race and the US Empire after World War II.
Hawai‘i statehood, as the event that marked the official end of Hawai‘i’s colonial status, thus occupies a key place in the discussion. As scholars have argued, the incorporation of Hawai‘i as the fiftieth state of the union in 1959 signaled an imperative to showcase America’s commitment to freedom and democracy in the decolonizing world, partly by mobilizing discourses of Hawai‘i as a racial and ethnic “melting pot” that reaffirmed America as a “nation of nations.”

The racial liberalism of Hawai‘i statehood, this essay underscores, was not antithetical to the processes of militarization but was constitutive of them. The promise of liberal inclusion for Hawai‘i’s ethnic and indigenous subjects not only obscured the history of US imperialism in the islands but also manifested in renewed forms of colonial state violence in Hawai‘i and elsewhere in Asia.

American studies and postcolonial studies scholars have long maintained that US imperialism functions through not only coercive state policies and actions but also seemingly benign forms of power that mobilize racialized and gendered notions of benevolence, protection, and uplift. Such discursive power indeed has never been just a ruse for imperial violence. As Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez demonstrates in her study of militarism and tourism in Hawai‘i and the Philippines, for example, touristic ideologies and practices of mobility and consumer freedom historically depend on, and reinforce, the long-standing presence of the military as a regulatory apparatus. At the same time that tourism has obscured the violence of the US colonial project and the ongoing effects of militarism in the islands, it simultaneously reenacts the “masculinized and militarized desires for security” that continue to legitimate US imperialism in the region.

Gonzalez’s study is part of a growing body of scholarship interrogating the contradictions of US imperial formation in the Pacific, particularly of the ways that US militarism produces historical and ongoing forms of colonial subjugation while becoming normalized as part of daily life to structure a culture of complicity, even gratitude, among those living in empire’s shadows. In this sense, Hawai‘i was far from exceptional. In the post–World War II era, Hawai‘i constituted a node within a wider geography of US militarism that also included Okinawa, Guam, and the Northern Marianas; on these other Pacific islands, US military training exercises and weapons testing generated a growing arsenal for the war in Vietnam while the military continually worked to justify its presence on the islands by restaging memories of American “liberation” from Japanese colonial rule. These and other efforts to present the US military as a benevolent force, moreover, have forestalled other demilitarized and anticolonial forms of sovereignty. “The gift of freedom,” as Mimi Nguyen reminds us, “carries a stubborn remainder of its absence”—a remaineder
trace that, in this instance, manifested both in the violence of war in Southeast Asia and in the insurgent movements for decolonization proliferating across the Pacific in the late 1960s and 1970s, movements that were making sense of the overlapping colonial histories in the region at the moment they were being recalibrated for war.9

This essay offers one interpretation of Hawai‘i’s part within this wider Pacific history of empire and decolonization. It begins by explaining how territorial leaders in the 1950s manufactured Hawai‘i’s multiracial “paradise” and military “garrison” in tandem in the buildup toward statehood, partly by mobilizing the martial patriotism of Hawai‘i-born and -raised Japanese. As statehood closed the door on Native sovereignty by framing liberal inclusion as the only viable means of decolonization, it simultaneously set the stage for Hawai‘i’s protracted war in Vietnam in the next decade. Beginning in 1965, as American soldiers deployed from Schofield Barracks, they channeled their “aloha spirit” to the Vietnamese through humanitarian civic action projects; but seemingly just as quickly they resolved to the tactics of colonial violence practiced at Kara Village. The atrocities they committed were no aberration, I argue, but instead underscored the intrinsic violence of Hawai‘i’s liberal inclusion into the US nation-state, a promise of freedom that reproduced and intensified state violence across the US Empire. In the end, the formations of race and empire in Hawai‘i—as a site of cultural diplomacy and as a site of war making—reveal not only Hawai‘i’s obscured role in the Vietnam War but also the deep entanglements of racial liberalism and state violence in US imperial culture, a contradiction that Hawai‘i activists seized on and politicized as part of a broader Pacific insurgency in the early 1970s.

Hawai‘i Statehood and US Empire

That Hawai‘i connected the United States to a wider Pacific world was not a post–World War II revelation but a view as old as the trade routes linking the United States to the fabled Asian markets in the nineteenth century. When the naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan penned his tract in 1890 about the necessities of American “sea power,” he confirmed what American sugar planters and mercantilists already knew, that the fortunes of commercialism depended on a strong military presence on and around the Hawaiian Islands. The annexation of Hawai‘i in 1898 thus hastened the construction of military bases throughout O‘ahu, fortifying an island “ring of steel” that would secure the demands of sugar production in the coming decades.10
The onset of the Pacific war, however, shifted the military imperative decisively. No longer tied solely to commercial trade, the defense of Hawai‘i during and after the war became important to the security of the Pacific as a region of US national interest. Accordingly, in 1945 General Douglas MacArthur revealed his plans for a postwar “Pacific Basin,” in which Hawai‘i occupied the site of central command for a defense line connecting the Marianas, the Philippines, the Ryukyus, and the Aleutians. As MacArthur believed, Hawai‘i was well situated for a deployment of “long-range, land-based airpower, emphasizing initial readiness, flexibility, rapid concentration and expansion.”

Without missing a beat, Hawai‘i’s business leaders jumped at the opportunity to promote the territory in the name of defense. “We are very close to Asia and have good intelligence from the countries of the Far East as well as Southeast Asia,” chamber of commerce president Farrant Turner wrote to the US Senate preparedness committee in 1952, “and we are certain that preparedness to meet the grave situation in Asia is becoming urgent rapidly.”

As territorial leaders understood, a permanent military presence in Hawai‘i would not only spell the key to US defense in the long war ahead but also secure the territory’s economy. In March 1951, when the US Army announced plans to establish the Hawaiian Infantry Training Center at Schofield Barracks to train inductees from the United States and the territories of Guam, Samoa, and Hawai‘i for the Korean War, territorial leaders quickly supported the move. With foresight, they argued that even after the Korean War the training center would maintain long-term potential for Hawai‘i’s economic development and, ultimately, prospects for statehood. According to Territorial Governor Ingram Stainback, “The overall boost to the economy of the Territory [derived from the training center] could easily amount to six or seven million dollars annually.” The trainees who passed through Schofield Barracks would be more than an asset to the military, but also “a potential Statehood booster and a future tourist.” Such promises led the army to describe the trainees as “tourists in uniform,” while civic boosters saw them as “ambassadors of good will” who would return to the mainland to tell Americans “about these wonderful islands of ours.” Hawai‘i’s draw to the soldier-consumer was unmistakable. As the chamber of commerce reasoned, what Hawai‘i lacked in its potential for war manufacturing it made up with “our climate, our plains, our mountains and jungles, our beaches, our archipelago,” all of which created “the ideal place for year-round and intensive draft training of troops.”

As the key selling point of a new militarized Hawai‘i, the islands’ climate and topography promised to transform young men into exemplary soldiers and tourists at the same time. The “tourist in uniform” certainly was a present force
in Hawai‘i as early as in the late 1890s, when American soldiers were treated to the “natural” beauty of the occupied islands during their transpacific voyage to war in the Philippines. The Cold War in Asia further fueled an economy around the pleasures of war making in Hawai‘i, creating a military-tourism complex in which the two industries grew increasingly dependent on each other. These processes not only restaged racialized and gendered relations of power that cast “natives” as objects of white American masculine desire but also manifested in a built environment that furthered the dispossession of Native Hawaiians. In a 1958 study of military land use on O‘ahu, the most densely populated island of Hawai‘i, an urban planning firm confirmed that the pace of militarization was fast impeding the potential for urban development. Without compromising one for the other, the report concluded that the “best solution would result from a collaborative effort [from which] both the military establishment and the civilian community can profit.”

This “collaborative effort” between the military and civilian communities would accelerate massive construction projects on O‘ahu over the next decade and beyond, especially around Waikiki Beach that became a prime destination for soldiers and their families during R&R (rest and recuperation). Such a mutual partnership in fact had emerged for some time. In 1954 a new generation of political leaders, many of them World War II veterans and descendants of Japanese plantation workers, swept the Democratic Party to power with promises of far-reaching economic reforms. Determined to transform the unequal patterns of land ownership that long had foreclosed the economic mobility of Hawai‘i’s Japanese settler communities, they quickly embraced military spending as a welcome path to modernization. “The time had come for us to step forward,” Daniel Inouye, the decorated veteran and Hawai‘i senator, reflected some years after the war. “We had fought for that right with all the furious patriotism in our bodies and now we didn’t want to go back to the plantation.” Few returned to the places where their parents toiled; instead, many Nisei veterans capitalized on their military service to secure positions of political leadership, determined to shape Hawai‘i’s political and economic future.

As the territory’s Japanese leaders promoted the militarization of the islands, they also emerged more publicly in the debates about statehood. By the 1950s, as Haunani-Kay Trask and others argue, statehood became the primary vehicle for the political ascendency of Hawai‘i-born and -raised Japanese and Chinese. Increasingly they were called on to marshal evidence of their patriotism and, by extension, of Hawai‘i’s rightful place in the nation and the world. In 1957 David Namaka, proclaiming himself a “Hawaiian” and an “Army Veteran,”
appealed to President Dwight Eisenhower: “A nation is only as strong as its component parts, and I feel strongly that Hawai’i is not only an integral but an essential component of our great American Nation.” Especially at a time when the United States sought to secure the world from communism, Hawai’i statehood was an imperative more than ever. “Many Asians look upon Hawaii as a ‘colony,’ a status from which they assume all colonial peoples want to be freed in order that they can become independent,” Lawrence Nakatsuka, the governor’s press secretary, told the White House in 1957. But the people of Hawai’i didn’t want “independence,” he reassured; they wanted equality, and statehood was the answer. Granting statehood to Hawai’i would affirm the United States as an empire for racial equality and freedom.

Here, the violence of liberal empire already was underway. In proclaiming statehood a civil rights imperative, statehood proponents effectively silenced Native voices for decolonization, rendering them illegitimate, even criminal. Framed as the only logical step forward in realizing America as a multiracial democracy, statehood rearticulated decolonization as the liberal inclusion of Hawai’i’s indigenous and Asian population into the US nation-state, thereby derailing and disavowing the pressing demands for Native sovereignty. A mounting grassroots opposition against statehood by Native Hawaiians nonetheless could not overcome the power of the liberal political establishment. In January 1959 the Hawai’i state legislature voted and passed the statehood bill. The plebiscite, in fact, had violated a 1953 United Nations resolution mandating that voters be given other choices on the ballot besides territorial status or statehood, namely, “independence” and “separate systems of self-government.” With neither of these options available, voters overwhelmingly chose statehood. Widely hailed by the press as a victory for Hawai’i’s Asian population, statehood firmly cemented Hawai’i as an “international melting pot” that would shape the course of freedom in the Pacific world. Against the violation of international trust obligations and the ongoing repression of indigenous struggles for decolonization, the stage was set for the United States to continue its “liberation” projects elsewhere in Asia.

In the end, statehood was more than just an event; it was an ideological project of the US state to preserve empire in the name of freedom, a “freedom with violence” that would intensify across the Pacific in the next decade. Statehood reaffirmed that a commitment to liberalism was a commitment to war, a reality that manifested in the ongoing suppression of Native sovereignty and in the steady militarization of the islands under the demands of economic growth and national security. Indeed, at the start of the 1960s the military presence in Hawai’i was an unquestioned necessity. Before the first state legislature
in April 1961, Governor William Quinn spoke in uncompromising terms: “The Federal government should and must remain one of the major users of land in Hawaii,” by which he meant “primarily the Armed Forces.” The benefits, he reasoned, were mutual: the military needed Hawai’i for its location, and Hawai’i needed the military for revenue and nationalist cohesion. But such neat rationalizations concealed more than they revealed. As much as statehood seemed to have resolved the tensions between militarism and liberalism in Hawai’i, it remained above all an unfinished project, as these dual forces soon came to animate a different US war across the Pacific.

“Aloha,” Vietnam

At the start of the 1960s, state leaders promptly took up the task of reclaiming federal “ceded lands” for Hawai’i’s urban development, a process empowered by the Statehood Act that, by the next decade, galvanized indigenous struggles around land rights. As this process was underway, however, events on the other side of the world rendered the land-use debate suddenly less significant in the state assembly. On August 3, 1964, US news headlines announced that the US naval destroyer Maddox had come under siege in the Gulf of Tonkin by North Vietnamese patrol boats. Within the week, this news prompted a resolution in Congress that amounted to a declaration of war. The debate about the military presence on Hawai’i had transformed overnight into one about impending war and its impact for the military community and the state economy. On this score, Hawai’i leaders remained hopeful. The “long-term U.S. military commitment to the Pacific and to Hawaii,” one economist summed up, “will make government spending a continuing important element in the Hawaii economy for a decade or more ahead.” And as Governor John Burns announced confidently in July 1965, “I think all of Hawaii is 100 percent behind the President’s position [on the war].” His statement glossed over the dissent within the Hawai’i legislature and the public that erupted in due time. On the surface, though, it would seem that the Vietnam War reaffirmed Hawai’i’s national purpose as a bastion of US military power in the Pacific.

The discourses of racial liberalism that had helped secure statehood in the 1950s were again mobilized with urgency, this time through the military. As the reality of war set in, all eyes in Hawai’i turned to the Twenty-Fifth Infantry Division that had been stationed at Schofield Barracks as the army’s Pacific reserve force since the end of the Korean War. By this time, the Twenty-Fifth’s record in the Pacific already was legendary. Its famed campaigns in Guadalcanal and Luzon during World War II and its successes in the Korean War had
become an intrinsic part of Hawai‘i’s political culture, signified by its nickname, “Hawai‘i’s own,” even though its soldiers were mostly white Americans from the US mainland. That “Hawai‘i’s own” did not actually originate from Hawai‘i mattered little, however; by the 1960s it had acquired a reputation in the army as “the only counter-guerrilla trained division” skilled in navigating “native” terrains and cultures, and even several Asian languages. The Twenty-Fifth’s cultural fluencies and military experiences all but ensured its part in the initial buildup of US ground forces in South Vietnam. In December 1965, with a four-thousand-man task force deployed to the Central Highlands of Pleiku Province, and a local recruitment drive and reserves training program in high gear, Hawai‘i’s protracted engagement in the Vietnam War had begun.27

The war that started in 1965 had its origins more than a decade before, when US military advisers first engineered counterinsurgencies to steer South Vietnam on a path to liberal democracy; years after these initial efforts, however, Americans encountered the same problems that mired their predecessors. In February 1965 the US ambassador to South Vietnam Maxwell Taylor warned the State Department against deploying US troops on racial grounds. “[The] white-faced soldier armed, equipped and trained as he is [is] not [a] suitable guerrilla fighter for Asian forests and jungles,” he insisted. The “French tried . . . and failed; I doubt that U.S. forces could do much better.” Cast as a conflict waged in unconventional territory and against a population suspicious of “white-faced” soldiers, the Vietnam War proved entirely incompatible for the modern US military, whose superior firepower was all but useless in a guerrilla situation. “Finally,” Taylor continued, “there would be [the] ever present question of how [a] foreign soldier would distinguish between a VC [Viet Cong] and [a] friendly Vietnamese farmer. When I view this array of difficulties, I am convinced that we should adhere to our past policy of keeping ground forces out of [a] direct counterinsurgency role.”28 Such concerns foreboded all too precisely the kind of racialized warfare that would ensue in the coming years. But nonetheless, American soldiers went forth, determined to change hearts and minds.

The soldiers of the Twenty-Fifth Division sought to overcome their racial difference with the Vietnamese by engaging in humanitarian projects, which enacted Hawai‘i exceptionalism from the start. In January 1966, when the division’s Second Brigade arrived in Cu Chi District of Hau Nghia Province, a historical stronghold of the National Liberation Front, the soldiers promptly embarked on a “civic action” campaign to cultivate habits of self-governance among the villagers and to win their loyalty to the South Vietnamese government. The brigade’s tasks included building schools, roads, and clinics, and
initiating training programs on public health and vocational skills. These projects were crucial to transforming South Vietnam into a modern nation-state, military and state officials believed, a process not dissimilar from Hawai‘i’s transition to statehood not long ago. As Fred C. Weyand, the Twenty-Fifth’s commanding general, remarked in a press release to Hawai‘i’s citizens: “We are proud of the fact that the 25th Infantry Division, ‘Hawaii’s Own,’ is serving as an important element of the United States’ effort in support of the struggle by the people of Viet Nam to retain their independence and freedom. However, to win in Viet Nam, it will take more than bullets, guns and soldiers. Unless we can also assist the Vietnamese in their efforts to improve their way of life, the winning of battles may well be in vain.” Civic action, Weyand underscored, was at the heart of the Twenty-Fifth’s mission. As he stated often, “My Tropic Lightning m[en] must be good neighbors to the Vietnamese people.”

General Weyand’s press statement framed the Twenty-Fifth’s military activities through a language of liberal inclusion that the people of Hawai‘i understood well. If statehood had secured Hawai‘i’s “freedom” for the age of decolonization by incorporating its subjects into the nation-state, then the soldiers of the Twenty-Fifth could help do the same for the Vietnamese. And here, Hawai‘i’s citizens had a role to play. Weyand clarified his intentions to Governor Burns shortly after his press announcement: “We believe a major victory in the civic action battle to win the Vietnamese people can be won in Hawaii.” Specifically, Weyand had in mind a campaign to collect donations from O‘ahu’s civilian communities to be distributed in Hau Nghia by his soldiers. This project, which Weyand named “Operation Helping Hand,” would be an integral part of the Twenty-Fifth’s military civic action. Governor Burns was in support fully. As he announced to the public, “The people of Hawaii today have an opportunity to become directly involved in this most important phase of our country’s overall efforts in Vietnam.” The stakes of the people’s participation were crucial. “Charity is not our goal,” Weyand emphasized. “Instead, man lending a helping hand to his fellow man is what the ‘Tropic Lightning’ soldier will use to secure the friendship so necessary in a country where suspicion and distrust are commonplace.” Operation Helping Hand, which Weyand referred to as “an extension of our aloha” to the Vietnamese, at once instrumentalized Hawai‘i’s liberalism and mobilized its population for war.

The public’s response to the drive was overwhelming. In the weeks following, citizens turned out all kinds of goods, including soap, toothbrushes, tools, books, clothing, and foodstuffs. Civic groups such as the Boy Scouts pitched in by setting up stations at schools and markets to assemble the donations. By the
end of the drive, over $800,000 worth of goods were tallied and shipped. To Governor Burns, the result was everything he hoped for, and more. “The depth and breadth of support which came to Operation Helping Hand is a measure of Hawaii’s inherent greatness,” he declared. “Our people can deliver when it counts.” This “greatness” had as much to do with the people’s generosity as with the sheer extent of their consumer wealth. As Chinn Ho, the civilian aid to the army and appointed coordinator of Operation Helping Hand, stated at the outset, “What is plentiful for Hawaii’s citizens is frequently either a great luxury for the Vietnamese people or simply not available. In Viet Nam, where medical know-how is frequently many years behind that of western practice, toothpaste and toothbrushes become vital dental preventatives.” Tools like “knives, screwdrivers, saws, shovels, and picks will help the villagers improve their standard of living.” The list, he assured, “is virtually endless.” Whatever objects the people of Hawaii offered, “the Vietnamese will find a good use for your contribution.”

The scenes of Hawaii’s humanitarianism continued to unfold when the soldiers arrived. As the first truckloads of goods entered the villages of Hau Nghia on February 24, an army photojournalist was on hand to document the scene. “The hostility of villagers . . . melted into smiles,” the reporter glowed. Photographs captured images of barefoot schoolchildren standing in line to receive gifts from the soldiers; another depicted children crowding around for “their very first shower” with the soap and shampoo donated through Helping Hand. “A happy scene has returned to our village,” one representative of Tan An Hoi village remarked in a letter to Weyand. Before the arrival of the American soldiers, “Cu Chi District was desolate and like a desert,” the result of years of neglect under the “Viet Cong.” But “since the 25th Infantry Division has been stationed in this local area . . . my people’s standard of living has returned to normal.” What the Americans brought to the village, it seemed, was nothing short of a revolution on a small scale. As the village leader affirmed, they “have helped us to triumph over communists aggression, poverty and disease,” not only by the actions of the soldiers but also “by the gifts from Hawaii donated to our people.”

The enactment of Operation Helping Hand, choreographed and captured by the army photographer, not only confirmed to the people of Hawaii’s the positive impact of their humanitarian effort but also reproduced the colonial logic of the United States as a nonviolent and benevolent empire. The depictions of Vietnamese children produced what Laura Wexler terms “the innocent eye,” a gendered and domesticating gaze on the colonized that obscured relations of violence in the very act of portraying them. Indeed, Hawaii’s
Race and Empire in Hawai’i’s Vietnam War

provided the crucial narrative frame to these images of anticonquest. While the scenes restaged the familiar paternalism of the US military, they also focused on Hawai’i’s “gifts” as the instrument of pacification, literally passing from the hands of benevolent white soldiers to the children. Hawai’i’s gifts worked to sustain the colonial fantasy that the United States always has been an inclusionary empire—in this instance, working to bring “native” Vietnamese into the fold of Hawai’i’s newly constituted multiracial family, even as that vision of domesticity was contingent on the exclusion and dispossession of Native Hawaiians.

These scenes indeed proved all too illusory in the end. Just two months after the Twenty-Fifth Division completed its mission in Cu Chi, a report by the RAND Corporation found that the “villagers’ attitude towards the [South Vietnamese government] appeared, in general, to be worse than it was before pacification began.” Such a reality remained occluded in public discourse; but in some ways it was inconsequential. The images of Operation Helping Hand had reified and reinforced the counterinsurgency’s success and

Figure 1
Hawai‘i’s exceptionalism, a double function that sutured Hawai‘i and Vietnam as twinned sites of war.

More specifically, Operation Helping Hand made a racialized war of aggression against the Vietnamese seem an impossible reality to Hawai‘i’s citizens. It was a kind of war wholly incompatible with Hawai‘i’s multiracial democracy, and one that its soldiers were deemed incapable of committing. The Twenty-Fifth Division stood for inclusion and progress; anything else was a deviation, a slippage supposedly enabled only within the unstable environment of the Southeast Asian jungles. When soldiers returned to Hawai‘i for R&R the following year, they once again restaged the scenes of Hawai‘i’s militarized modernity, and thereby reinforce the distance and difference between the islands and the war waged far away. On the beachfront paradise of O‘ahu, the violent conducts of a racialized war seemed a distant reality. Little did the Hawai‘i public know that some twenty miles inland from these sites of rejuvenation, the US Army had cultivated Hawai‘i’s own “jungles” to prepare soldiers for their unruly encounters in Vietnam.

**Simulating Race War**

If US officials had imagined Hawai‘i as a metaphorical “bridge” to Asia in the Cold War, their geographic distance seemed to fold into each other with the escalation of war in Vietnam. By 1965 the militarization of Hawai‘i that continued in full force would fuel not only the dispossession of Native peoples from their lands but also the active preservation of landscapes to mimic the “native” conditions of Southeast Asia for military training purposes. The engineering of this imaginative geography took place largely at Schofield Barracks. Located in the island’s interior, Schofield Barracks sat on rugged terrain that urban planners in the 1950s had deemed unsuitable for development. Lands that developers had no use for, however, the army increasingly prized. By the early 1960s, as the US military grew more focused on waging counterguerrilla operations worldwide, Schofield Barracks assumed the place for conducting novel military training exercises. As the Department of Defense reported in January 1960, the fifty thousand acres of federally leased land on O‘ahu consisting largely of “forest reserve, lava fields and mountainous areas, which have little revenue potential” for developers, should be fully exploited for training purposes. From 1960 through the duration of the war in Vietnam, “jungle warfare” training thus marked the specialized mission of the US Army Command in Hawai‘i.
The success that Weyand attributed to the Twenty-Fifth Division in 1966 indeed was owed in no small part to the training the soldiers had received under the “realistic” conditions at Schofield Barracks. According to General William Westmoreland and General Stanley Larsen, the top US military commanders in Vietnam at the time, the Twenty-Fifth had “some of the best trained and certainly best acclimated troops” to arrive in country. “The Wolfhounds have never found terrain [in Vietnam] as difficult as that they found in the Koolaus,” Weyand chimed in. “The conditioning they got . . . has enabled them to come here and fight in this heat and at this place without dropping.”40 But the “realism” did not stop with the terrain and climate. To enhance the simulated environments of war further, the army constructed twelve “Southeast Asian type ‘villages,’” outfitted with thatched huts and “native” inhabitants. These mock villages formed “Kara Village,” a component of the Jungle and Guerrilla Warfare Training Center that, by 1965, was processing about one thousand men a month for rotation to Vietnam.41

The mock village was a technology of race war, a simulacrum that conjured the racialized enemy through spatial enactments and that taught soldiers to approach their whole surrounding as a target of violence.42 Intended to mimic the reality of what soldiers would encounter, the mock village did less to render the sites of war more familiar than to affirm their ultimate unknowability. Its elaborate design, complete with rice paddies, secret tunnels, and false walls and fireplaces, reinforced the “village” as a site of hostility that needed to be engaged entirely, and where the absence of the enemy only confirmed their always lurking presence. As Weyand explained, “My people go into this area, sweep through and try to round them up and kill them. Maybe we only get 10 at a time but we are like vacuum sweepers. Eventually, the rug comes out clean.”43 By 1966 mock villages proliferated across army bases in the United States, to prepare soldiers for “search and destroy” operations that had become the war’s trademark. By then, too, the mock village had traveled far across the US Pacific empire to places like Takee, Okinawa, and Fort Gulick in the Panama Canal Zone.44 In October 1965, for example, the US Army School of the Americas at Fort Gulick sent its officers to observe the training at Schofield Barracks. There they witnessed exercises conducted in Vietnamese villages, a novel concept that they took back with them and implemented on their own.45 From its origins at Schofield Barracks, the mock village had made its way to other US colonial outposts to set the army-wide blueprint for waging the war in Vietnam.

The imaginative geography of Kara Village, a colonial backwater that stood at odds with the “progress” cultivated elsewhere in O‘ahu, represented
the colonial violence at the heart of Hawai‘i’s liberal modernity. The violent displacements of Native Hawaiians and the disavowal of their sovereignty through statehood indeed came to be reanimated through Kara Village, specifically through the enactments against “natives” played by the soldiers. Typically hidden from the rest of the island, the violence of Kara Village made a spectacular appearance before the public in the summer of 1967. At that year’s annual state fair, as tourists and residents converged in downtown Honolulu to celebrate the ninth year of statehood, the absent presence of “natives” in Hawai‘i suddenly became glaring at the army’s display. Alongside its showcase of modern military technologies, the army also created a “Vietnamese” display, featuring an assortment of “Viet Cong” weapons, and even some “Viet Cong” themselves. These subjects, donning black pajamas, straw hats, and rubber sandals, seemed to embody the Vietnamese enemy in the flesh. Not unlike the display of Igorots at the St. Louis World’s Fair at the turn of the twentieth century, the representations of the Vietnamese through the staging of “primitive natives” in their natural warring habitat simultaneously justified the war abroad and reinforced Hawai‘i’s progress.

But unlike the 1904 World’s Fair, these “native” men were not brought from Asia across the Pacific; they were from Hawai‘i. Specifically, they were members of Hawai‘i’s National Guard, which, in contrast to the Twenty-Fifth Division, comprised mostly Natives and Asians from Hawai‘i. While scholars have long noted the absence of Asian American and Pacific Islander soldiers from mainstream accounts of the Vietnam War, these soldiers nonetheless figured pivotally in the military’s racialized training practices, as they were often called to act on both sides of its war games. In this sense, the value of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the military derived less from their martial abilities than from their perceived racial difference that allowed them to stand in for the “native” body as a target of violence, even as their very presence allowed the US state to disavow charges of racism. Thus the category native operates as a flexible discourse, blurring the line between liberal inclusion and militarized violence. That is, if the presence of the Asian and Native Hawaiian soldier in the military worked to signal the triumph of racial liberalism after statehood, then his racialization as “native” was a reminder about the perpetual necessity of military force to pacify and transform him into a modern citizen subject. It is this dual function of the Asian and Hawaiian soldier—as a symbol of liberal inclusion and an embodied site of violence—that demonstrates the contradictory promise of racial liberalism within the limits of US imperial war.
Race and Empire in Hawai‘i’s Vietnam War

On June 15, 1967, the First Battalion, Twentieth Infantry of the Eleventh Infantry Brigade commenced training at Kara Village. The brigade, activated one year earlier to replace the Twenty-Fifth Division as the new Pacific reserve force, was preparing for deployment. Sergeant Manuel Alverado prefaced the training by giving a lecture to acquaint the trainees with the characteristics of Kara Village, before sending them off in squads to scout for hidden weapons, tunnels, and booby traps, and to clear out “Viet Cong” suspects. The soldiers who impersonated Viet Cong had received earlier instructions by Alverado to proceed to their “hiding places”—under a set of stairs, on top of a temple, inside a well. From start to finish, the exercise mimicked a search-and-destroy operation, re-created in minute detail. According to one report, the training was a success: “The trainees were given the opportunity for practical application of the things they have learned. The knowledge they gain here is intended to make the soldier more effective in the field by teaching him what he may expect.”

The soldiers did not wait long to discover precisely what to expect: on December 5, 1967, the brigade shipped out to Vietnam. Its first month in country passed by rather unremarkably, but the Tet Offensive the following month changed everything. With military intelligence that one battalion of
the National Liberation Front had dispersed into Son My village for refuge, Colonel Oran K. Henderson, the brigade’s commander, urged vigilance among his troops. “Go in there aggressively,” he ordered. “Close with the enemy and wipe them out for good.” On March 15 Captain Ernest Medina rounded up his own platoon of Charlie Company and told them: “There are no innocent civilians in this area.” The next day, the platoon entered the hamlets of My Lai, prepared to root out the “Viet Cong and Viet Cong sympathizers,” just as they had practiced at Schofield Barracks. But from Medina’s instructions, the operation seemed like nothing they had trained for. “We were supposed to wipe out the whole area—waste it,” one soldier understood of his task. Another had demanded clarification the night before: “Who is my enemy?” to which Medina replied, “Anybody that was running away from us, hiding from us, or appeared to be the enemy.” On March 16, 1968, Charlie Company laid waste to the hamlets, killing anybody and anything in sight. Men, women, children, and livestock were not spared. Before the morning’s end, an estimated three hundred to five hundred civilians were murdered.51

News of the My Lai massacre did not surface for more than a year. When it did, it took the nation by storm and galvanized the US antiwar movement. As protesters across the country decried its “senseless” violence, elected officials responded in kind. The White House declared the episode “abhorrent to the conscience of all the American people” and prompted the Senate and House Armed Services Committees to launch a full investigation. On November 26, 1969, as part of its inquest, the committees unveiled colored slides “before shocked and sickened members of Congress” depicting gruesome images of dead Vietnamese. “[This was] an act of brutality that cannot have been exceeded in Hitler’s time,” one senator condemned in horror.52 Daniel K. Inouye also joined the chorus of criticism. “If there is to be any way out of this national disgrace,” he exhorted, “it is to be found only through the prompt, complete and public investigation of what has occurred, the proper punishment of those responsible and through every effort to determine why My Lai happened.” To the Hawai‘i senator, the massacre implicated officials at every echelon of the military command. He went so far as to question the foundation of US military training, “which permits common reference to the Vietnamese as ‘gooks,’ ‘dinks’ or ‘slopes.’” “Are there racist overtones at work here?” he asked.53 For a brief and rare moment, reports of the My Lai massacre cast light on the racialized dimensions of US military violence, opening the space for public officials to condemn US policy. But little did the senator and others realize that this violence had intimate ties to Hawai‘i, honed and refined through the practices
at Schofield Barracks. It was a contradiction that remained unspeakable, to be expressed only by utterances of “surprise” and “horror.”

And just as quickly as it emerged, the violence of US liberal empire was contained immediately. The prosecution for the war crimes finally focused neither on ideological constructs nor on the policies that maintained them but on lone perpetrators. The media fixated on First Lieutenant William L. Calley, in particular, the army platoon leader charged with premeditated murder for ordering the shootings of civilians. Calley, the Honolulu Star-Bulletin mused in a lengthy exposé on December 4, 1969, was “an average guy”—“the same old Rusty,” as one friend recalled, which made his ability to commit mass murder all the more incomprehensible.\(^{54}\) Such individualized accounts eluded the more troubling questions demanded by Inouye and others. With the exception of one Star-Bulletin headline in the earlier reports of My Lai that mentioned Schofield Barracks as the site where the troops had trained, Hawai‘i’s role in the incident was obscured entirely in public discourse.\(^{55}\) But the erasure of Hawai‘i in narratives of My Lai was no accident, and not altogether surprising. Instead, it once more spoke to Hawai‘i’s exceptionalism—a militarized paradise that stood for racial progress and modernity, no place for imperial violence. It was the same false divide that had informed and enabled Hawai‘i statehood a decade before and that in turn justified its role in the war. Hawai‘i’s activists wasted no time in exposing these false claims. Even before news of My Lai broke out, a political insurgency in Hawai‘i was underway.

**Resisting War, Resisting “Paradise”**

On April 11, 1968, President Lyndon Johnson announced the activation of the Army Reserve and National Guard units for duty in Vietnam, a call-up that involved 3,288 National Guardsmen and 782 reservists from Hawai‘i. The event ignited a local antiwar movement that brought together mainstream Democrat leaders with a growing radical Left. As state legislators expressed concerns about the disproportionate burden of the call-up on Hawai‘i’s population, demanding “fairness” and “equality,” many activists, including students, the clergy, and active-duty GIs, recognized the problem’s deeper roots. The call-up was “the deliberate policy of the Pentagon for a far-away colony,” one citizen wrote in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, a part of “the history of exploiting men from Hawaii as colonial troops . . . whose casualties will not upset the mainstream of American public opinion.”\(^{56}\) A few months after the call-up, members of the Twenty-Ninth Infantry Brigade—the major unit of the Hawai‘i National Guard ordered for deployment—filed a petition calling for their
immediate demobilization and a swift end to the war. “The time has come for Hawaiians to wake up to reality,” they demanded. “There is only one part of the world where over 500 men (mostly Infantrymen) are WEEKLY losing their lives, and that place is Vietnam.” The war, they urged, must end at once. “More troops will only result in more deaths and soon Hawaii will leave its National Guard to rest forever in the jungles of Southeast Asia.”

The antiwar politics that erupted at the end of the 1960s gave activists a new language to make sense of the structural violence of US colonialism in Hawai‘i, to approach it as an inseparable part of US militarism in Asia. By 1970 such global connections linking Hawai‘i’s “development” to the US war in Vietnam inspired a grassroots struggle in Kalama Valley on O‘ahu that, by nearly all accounts, marked the beginnings of the modern Hawai‘i sovereignty movement. At Kalama Valley, activists who had opposed the war on the principle of Vietnamese self-determination rallied to support local residents and indigenous peoples as they resisted against their forced eviction by the Bishop Estate, the largest private landowner in Hawai‘i. As Haunani-Kay Trask argues, “Kalama Valley was the end result of a post-Statehood (post-1959) shift in Hawai‘i’s economy,” from its prewar dependence on cash crops to one tied increasingly to tourism and land speculation that accelerated and compounded the problem of landlessness among the rural poor, and Native Hawaiians in particular. The slogan of the anti-eviction struggle, “land for local people, not tourists,” quickly became a rallying cry that resonated far beyond Kalama Valley, as activists called attention to the violent displacements wrought by tourism and militarism throughout the islands. In an exposé titled “Hawaii’s Strategic Hamlets,” in a 1971 issue of *Hawaii Pono Journal*, the writer aptly chose the language of US counterinsurgency to describe the conditions of displacement and landlessness in O‘ahu, clarifying that these were not simply a tragic yet inevitable consequence of urban development but the functions of an ongoing war waged against Native Hawaiians poststatehood. The war in Vietnam (and by 1969, also in Laos and Cambodia), in short, provided a transpacific anti-imperialist framework for activists to recognize and to address the concrete issues faced by Hawai‘i’s peoples; through their engagement with local and indigenous struggles for land rights, these diverse activists sowed the seeds for a protracted sovereignty movement that emerged in full force by the mid-1970s.

Activists deployed creative tactics to connect their critique of the Vietnam War with a critique of the historical conjuncture of liberalism and colonialism in Hawai‘i. In February 1972, for example, *Liberated Barracks*, an “underground” publication of the local GI movement, published a map of O‘ahu (see fig. 3).
The map recalled the myriad others published over the past two decades, namely, those depicting military installations for official use or those pinpointing sites for tourist consumption. But if these earlier maps had tended to depict one or the other, serving seemingly divergent purposes, the one in *Liberated Barracks* singularly accomplished both. Its disjunctive title, “Enjoy Hawaii: Home Staging-Ground for the War in Indochina,” introduced readers to its unorthodox reading of Oahu’s geography. Using a recognizable language and interface found in tourist brochures, the map rendered the unknown familiar. It guided readers, “Be sure to visit all U.S. Military-occupied lands indicated by blacked-out areas,” followed by a description of four such highlighted areas. Under the “My Lai Jungle Training Center,” the caption revealed “Hawaii’s Little Vietnam” as the genesis for the My Lai massacre, pointing the readers’ gaze to the center of O’ahu. In a corner, the map listed other facts about Hawai’i’s role in the Vietnam War and the sheer extent of its militarization: “Did you know . . . that Hawaii is the most heavily militarized group of Islands in the world?” The point of the map was simple: to make transparent the processes of militarization that had proceeded apace with the transformation of Hawai’i into a modern “paradise.” That the two processes occurred in lockstep was suggested by the final words sprawled

Figure 3.
below the map, a juxtaposition that nonetheless formed a coherent description: “Paradise in the Pacific for Genocide in Indochina.”

In contrast to the mainstream insistence on the absence of colonial violence within Hawai‘i’s liberal progress, the map illustrated the two as inescapably intertwined. The map was the creation of Liberated Barracks and Catholic Action, the latter a religious left group formed in late 1970 to raise public awareness about Hawai‘i’s role in US militarism in the Pacific. It had functioned as a “key organizing tool,” according to Jim Albertini of Catholic Action, distributed widely in Hawai‘i, and even to Japanese prime minister Kakeui Tanaka during his visit with President Richard M. Nixon in Honolulu in August 1972. But in their organizing efforts, the activists wanted more than just to make transparent the “blacked-out areas” of Hawai‘i’s geography; they sought to disrupt their existence altogether. On Christmas Eve 1971, following a silent vigil against the war at the Wahiawa United Methodist Church, a few miles east of Schofield Barracks, the crowd of protesters headed to the army base to continue their demonstration. Their journey to the base was untypical, and in a way just as symbolic as the protest they staged once there, traversing physical and imagined distances that had defined Hawai‘i’s obscured centrality to the US Empire. The group’s target was the Jungle Training Center, a place tainted with the blood and memories of My Lai, which they planned to rededicate to a Vietnamese woman who had immolated herself in protest earlier in the year. As the group of about twenty walked through Kara Village, they marveled at the sights of pagodas, huts, and straw figures mimicking the Vietnamese. “It was bizarre, surreal, to come across a Vietnamese village . . . right on your island,” Albertini recalled. “This is where you would train to do My Lai.” As they walked quietly through the training center, they were surprised to draw neither the attention of military authorities, who observed from afar, nor that of the media. The protests at Schofield Barracks on Christmas Eve 1971 passed by simply as a nonevent, just as the history of Kara Village and its connection to the My Lai massacre remained forcibly suppressed in public memory. After gazing at their surroundings some more, the group proceeded with the rededication ceremony.

Such protests might occupy a mere footnote in conventional accounts of the US antiwar movement that typically gesture to the movement’s decline by this time. But if approached through a transpacific frame, these episodes document a movement in which antiwar activism figured as just one part of a longer and more protracted struggle for decolonization in the Pacific. Indeed, Hawai‘i’s protests against war and militarization were deeply connected to those occurring throughout the region in the late 1960s and 1970s, including
the antimilitary and anti-imperialist movements in the Philippines, Okinawa, and other militarized locales. In Hawai‘i, activists brought to the fore the contradictions of race and empire that had cohered around the push for statehood and the mobilization for war. Hawai‘i was no paradise, they argued, but a military garrison; it was not a model of modernization for decolonizing Asia but a colonized territory itself. But in exposing these facts, many activists also understood that it was not simply one or the other. Empire, they knew, functioned far more insidiously. Thus, rather than end at these juxtapositions, they dwelled on the disjuncture, to make meaning of their “weird coexistence,” as Jim Albertini put it.

And it was precisely the politicization of these strange affinities—of liberalism and war, “paradise” and “genocide”—that radicalized the antiwar and anti-eviction struggles of the early 1970s and transformed them into a broader movement for Hawaiian sovereignty. In 1976, as Native activists occupied the island of Kaho‘olawe to protest its sustained use for military bombing, they reworked the earlier call at Kalama Valley of preserving land for “local” people into a more urgent demand to protect Native land from military use and destruction. These assertions of Native claims to land and sovereignty based on indigenous birthright continued to animate the Hawaiian Movement into the 1980s, inspiring other transpacific alliances “with American Indian activists on the mainland, antinuclear independence struggles throughout the South Pacific, and international networks in Asia and at the United Nations.”

Indeed, if the saga of Hawai‘i’s Vietnam War reveals the processes by which the US state mobilized the legacies of race and empire in the Pacific to wage war in Vietnam in the name of “liberation,” then the movements it spawned would strive not only to make visible the erasures and disavowals that made the US Empire possible but to realize a different kind of liberation altogether.

Notes

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7. Camacho, Cultures of Commemoration.

8. Shigematsu and Camacho, Militarized Currents, xxii.


12. Turner to Lyndon Johnson, January 23, 1952, box 48, folder Special Correspondence: Frank E. Midkiff, Henry S. Aurand Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, KS.

13. “Governor’s statement on Hawaii Infantry Training Center,” March 13, 1951, box 339, folder History of the Hawaiian Infantry Training Center; Organizational History Files, Military Historians’ Office; RG 550, National Archives, College Park, MD.

14. “Hawaii and the Armed Forces in 1951, paper submitted from Midkiff to Aurand, January 8, 1951, box 48, folder Special Correspondence: Frank E. Midkiff, Aurand Papers.

15. Gonzalez, Securing Paradise, 42.


17. Territorial Planning Director, Summary Report, April 1958, box 21, folder Land Use and Kahoolawe, Hiram L. Fong Papers, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa Library, Honolulu.

18. Quoted in George Cooper and Gavan Daws, Land and Power in Hawai‘i: The Democratic Years (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1990), 5–8, 42.


20. Namaka to Eisenhower, July 12, 1957; Nakatsuka to Hagerty, January 6, 1956, both in box 320, folder Statehood for Hawai‘i (1), Central Files, DDE Papers as President, Dwight Eisenhower Presidential Library.


37. Quoted in Young, Vietnam Wars, 148.
43. "Training in Koolaus Pays Off."
44. The use of land and villagers in Takae as a mock target for jungle warfare training is discussed in the documentary The Targeted Village (dir. Chie Mikami, 2013).


56. Correspondences, Kwai and Fong, May 21, 1968, box 12, folder Legislative-Armed Services, Fong Papers.

57. Open Letters, Twenty-Ninth Brigade, October 7 and July 13, 1968, box 125, folders 2 and 6, Patsy T. Mink Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.


65. Albertini, telephone conversation.