

East Asian Settler Colonialism and Its Impact on the Hawai‘i State Legislature

Paige J. Yuen

Honors Program, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

HON 495: Honors Thesis Proposal

Dr. Maria Chun

Wednesday, April 26, 2023

Abstract

Problem Statement

In response to the need for plantation labor in the 1800s, East Asian workers left their home countries and arrived in Hawai‘i in search of opportunity (Fujikane, 2008, p. 17). After the overthrow, annexation, and subsequent statehood of Hawai‘i, East Asians elevated their socioeconomic statuses, utilizing their families’ stories of hardship and experiences of racism during the plantation era and World War II to garner support for their economic and political endeavors. Consequently, East Asian politicians began to utilize their positions in power to pass legislation that would increase their capital accumulation through the exploitation of land, undermining Kanaka ‘Ōiwi sovereignty movements, rights, and cultural traditions (Kamahele, 2008, p. 78).

Research Aims and Significance

This proposed project aims to examine how East Asian legislators in Hawai‘i advanced and continue to advance pro-capitalist legislation while subverting Kanaka ‘Ōiwi sovereignty. This research is relevant as the study of settler colonialism is a fairly new area of scholarship. Furthermore, the specific study of East Asian settler colonialism in Hawai‘i is even more sparse and distinct. By analyzing and comparing various legislation from early statehood to the present through settler colonial and indigenous theoretical frameworks, this research may contribute to the understanding of the current political and economic landscape in Hawai‘i. It may also aid data and studies that center around socioeconomic disparities between East Asians and Kanaka ‘Ōiwi.

Land Acknowledgement

As a settler of Hawai‘i and student at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, I acknowledge the ‘āina that I conduct my research on is “located in the ahupua‘a of Waikīkī, in the moku of Kona, on the mokupuni of O‘ahu, in the pae‘āina of Hawai‘i. I recognize that her majesty Queen Lili‘uokalani yielded the Hawaiian Kingdom and these territories under duress and protest to the United States to avoid the bloodshed of her people. I further recognize that Hawai‘i remains an illegally occupied state of America” (*Land acknowledgement*).

I am grateful to have been born and raised in Hawai‘i and to continue my education here. Furthermore, I am grateful for the Kanaka Maoli who continue to educate and share their knowledge and sustainable systems. Through my scholarship and research, I hope to support Kānaka and their efforts toward sovereignty.

Because the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa aims to transform into a Native Hawaiian place of learning, I will be utilizing ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i throughout my proposal, research, and thesis. I will refer to Native Hawaiians as Kānaka, Kanaka Maoli, and Kanaka ‘Ōiwi as these terms illustrate their genealogical ties with land and distinguishes them from non-native residents of Hawai‘i (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, 2014, p. 2). Additional definitions to words or phrases in ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i can be found in Appendix A. All translations of these words or phrases are from the articles cited in the references or *Wehewehe wikiwiki*, an online ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i dictionary created by the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo.

Background Information and Literature Review

Key Definitions and Concepts

To understand the proposed project, key concepts and definitions must be explained. According to Wolfe (2006), settler colonialism is a “structure not an event” and aims to dissolve Indigenous communities and ways of life (p. 388). A concomitant of primitive accumulation and the Industrial Revolution, settler colonialism requires elimination in order to secure land and raw materials and, thus, capital (p. 387). Additionally, though not inherent, settler colonialism may manifest as “structural genocide” as the removal of Indigenous groups from their homelands was and is met with violence and brutality (p. 402). The antithesis to Indigenous and specifically Kanaka relationship with land, settler colonialism also counters misconceptions and scholarship that colonialism is relegated to the past (Kauanui, 2016).

As explained by Desmond and Emirbayer (2015), institutional racism is the systematic racial domination of people of color in organizations and other societal structures (p. 9). This form of racism is not synonymous with interpersonal racism, which is racism that occurs on an individual level or in daily interactions and may take overt and covert appearances. Additionally, racial domination, or White supremacy, is the arrangement of society to benefit a specific racial group. In the context of the United States, white people are the beneficiaries of these privileges. However, it is important to note that people of color, such as East Asians, can willingly or unknowingly carry out acts of racial domination (p. 13).

Translated into life, breath, and sovereignty, *ea* is a concept or practice that superimposes land over government (Goodyear-Kaʻōpua, 2014, p. 3). In contrast to Western philosophy of sovereignty, *ea* is rooted in the reciprocal relationship between people, *‘āina*, and all life forms (p. 4). Essential for survival, *ea* is crucial in understanding political independence movements in Hawai‘i and the ongoing resistance against American imperialism and militarism (p. 5).

Lastly, East Asians are individuals of either Japanese, Chinese, or Korean descent.

Western Contact and the Overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i

In 1778, Captain Cook stumbled upon Hawai‘i, catalyzing Western contact and subsequent imperialist efforts on the islands (Nā Maka o ka ‘Āina, 1993). As Western explorers voyaged to Hawai‘i, they introduced a plethora of deadly diseases, including measles, influenza, and tuberculosis (Silva, 2004, p. 24). Decimating the Kanaka population, an estimated population of 400,000 to 1,000,000 Kanaka Maoli plummeted to 135,000 in a span of forty-five years. Consequently, Western missionaries and businessmen initiated primitive accumulation in Hawai‘i, exploiting both ‘āina and people.

Instituting their Western ideologies, missionary advisors urged King Kamehameha III to divide the lands, thereby separating the relationship between konohiki and Maka‘āinana (Osorio, 2002, p. 44). Also known as the Māhele, the land division ultimately established private and public property in Hawai‘i, allowing White settlers to purchase and own land (p. 50). In juxtaposition of Kanaka principles and ea, the Māhele effectuated rapid capital accumulation and accelerated White political and economic ascendancy.

As imperialist efforts escalated internationally and annexation gained popularity and support amongst White settlers and politicians, the Hawaiian League, a group of haole descendants of missionaries, forced King Kalākaua to sign the Bayonet Constitution on July 6, 1887, further marginalizing Kanaka ‘Ōiwi (Osorio, 2002, p. 193). Characterized as a “revolutionary document” by Lorrin Thurston, a haole businessman instrumental in the overthrow, the constitution granted voting rights to White settlers, expediting haole political power and allowing haole businessmen to reform the government (p. 194). After Kalākauas’ death in 1891, his sister, Queen Lili‘uokalani, assumed the throne in 1891 (p. 249). A voice for

her people, Queen Lili‘uokalani attempted to create and institute a new constitution that would benefit Kanaka ‘Ōiwi (Nā Maka o ka ‘Āina, 1993). However, in fear of losing their power, the Committee of Safety illegally overthrew the Kingdom of Hawai‘i and imprisoned Queen Lili‘uokalani on January 17, 1893. In an attempt to avoid bloodshed and violence, she yielded her throne to protect Kanaka Maoli, and in 1898, Hawai‘i was annexed by the United States, setting the foundations for Hawai‘i statehood.

Plantations and the Introduction of Asian Settlers

In 1835, the first plantation, Kōloa, opened in Hawai‘i (Fujikane, 2008, p. 17). Due to a dwindling Kanaka population induced by Western disease and stereotypes surrounding Kānaka that they were lazy and poor workers, haole plantation owners looked towards East Asia for labor as the sugar industry boomed (Takaki, 1989, p. 24). Consequently, the first contract labor was comprised of Chinese laborers who arrived in Hawai‘i in 1852 and subsequently Japanese workers in 1885 (Fujikane, 2008, p. 17).

However, after the annexation of Hawai‘i, plantation owners had to adhere to U.S. federal laws regarding anti-Chinese immigration (Takaki, 1989, p. 26). Ergo, Chinese immigration ceased, and plantation owners imported Korean laborers to Hawai‘i to balance the growing Japanese population in 1903. Viewed as commodities essential to capital accumulation, these workers encountered poor working conditions and racism and were often pitted against each other in an effort by plantation owners to thwart unionization (p. 24).

Post World War II, Statehood, and Asian Ascendancy to Political Power

After World War II, the socioeconomic statuses of East Asian settlers, specifically Japanese settlers, drastically shifted (Cooper & Daws, 1985, p. 42). As the economy altered its reliance from plantations to tourism, East Asian settlers obtained middle-class jobs, and Japanese veterans who served in the war utilized their GI Bill to receive college degrees, specifically juris doctorates. Thus, in pursuit of an elevated socioeconomic status, East Asian settlers sought prestigious occupations in medicine, law, engineering, and, particularly, politics.

In 1959, Hawai‘i became a state, allowing East Asians to earn citizenship, voting rights, and, thus, the ability to run for political office (Trask, 2008, p. 46). Employing familial and generational stories of hardships and discrimination experienced during the plantation era and World War II, East Asians, especially those of Japanese descent, gained popularity and support for their political endeavors, carefully crafting narratives of success. In consequence, Hawaiian statehood was the catalyst for East Asian ascendancy, furthering Kanaka ‘Ōiwi dispossession of land and inequality.

Thus, individuals of specifically Japanese and Chinese descent began to dominate the Hawai‘i State Legislature and top positions in the government. Despite making up 32% of the population in Hawai‘i, Japanese politicians accounted for 67% of the total Democratic legislators in both the House of Representatives and the Senate (Cooper & Daws, 1985, p. 42). Following similar patterns, 58% of Democratic legislators were Japanese in spite of making up 28% of the total population in 1970, and in 1980, they made up 60% of the total Democratic legislators while constituting for a quarter of the population. Although not as prominent as those of Japanese descent, Chinese legislators are also historically overrepresented in the Hawai‘i State Legislature. For instance, despite accounting for a mere 5% of the total population, 10% of Democratic legislators were those of Chinese ancestry in the 1980s (p. 43).

Land Developments

Transitioning from a plantation to tourist economy, East Asian politicians were eager to develop land and sought opportunities in real estate. Forming relationships with large landowners, Democratic legislators became heavily involved in new land developments as businessmen and lawyers, while simultaneously dictating which proposals or bills were approved (Cooper & Daws, 1985, p. 46). For instance, in 1959, Senator Mitsuyuki Kido lobbied for an increase of pay for trustees of charitable organizations, such as Bishop Estate, the largest landowner in Hawai'i (p. 48). Shortly thereafter, Kido and the Bishop Estate announced the development of He'eia, which was utilized as agricultural lands (p. 50). Additionally, East Asian businessmen with close ties with Democratic legislators concurrently became appointees to large trusts (p. 53). In particular, Chinese businessman Chinn Ho gained a position as trustee at the Mark A. Robinson Trust and a board member of Theo H. Davies. Additionally, Chinese businessman Hung Wo Ching was elected to the board of Alexander & Baldwin and a trustee for the Bishop Estate.

Significance and Contribution to Research

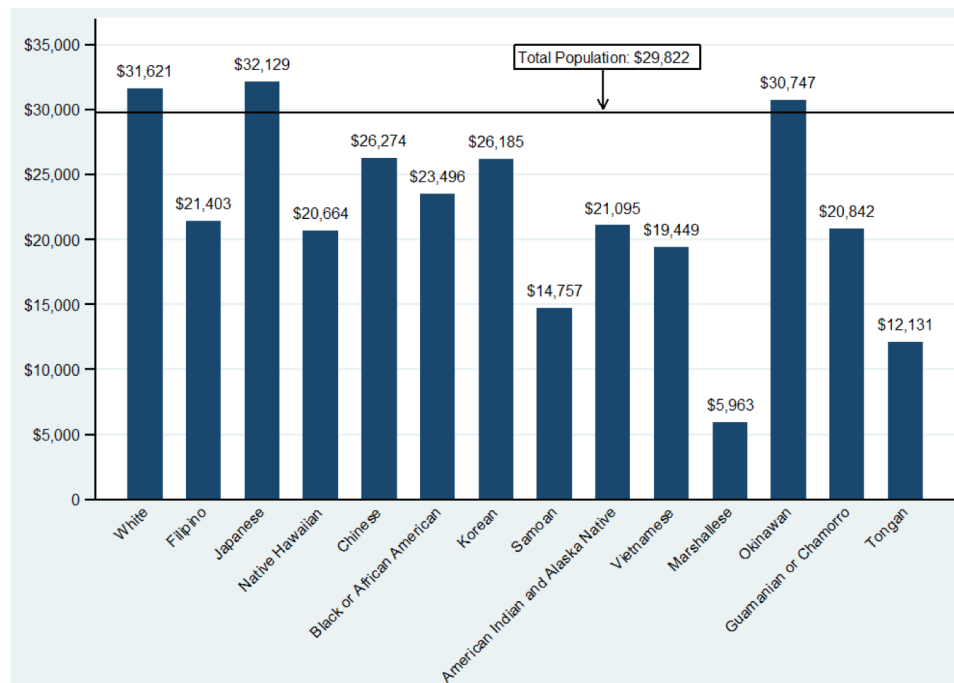
In addition to being a fairly new area of scholarship, research on East Asian settler colonialism in Hawai'i is critical in understanding socioeconomic disparities between East Asians and Kanaka Maoli.

In data from a 2018 report, individuals of Japanese, Okinawan, Chinese, and Korean descent have a much higher per capita income than Kanaka Maoli and other Pacific Islanders, including Tongans, Samoans, and Marshallese, as demonstrated in Figure 1 (Fogleman, 2018).

Moreover, Japanese and Okinawans have an above average per capita income with incomes of \$32,129 and \$30,747 respectively. Moreover, while 3.8% Japanese, 1.8% Okinawan, 8% Chinese, and 9.1% Korean families live in poverty, 12.6% Kanaka families are impoverished.

Figure 1

Per Capita Income by Race Group



Note. From Demographic, Social, Economic and Housing Characteristics for Selected Race Groups in Hawai‘i, by C. Fogleman, 2018, Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism (DBEDT).

Thus, my research aims to answer the following questions: (1) how does legislation pertaining to land development further these socioeconomic inequalities in the past and present, (2) how do ideals of liberal multiculturalism in Hawai‘i enable East Asian legislators to enact sweeping capitalist legislation, (3) what commonalities does legislation have from early statehood to the contemporary, and (4) how does East Asian settler colonialism fabricate

narratives of the need for capitalism and U.S. occupation and the illusion of Hawaiian sovereignty.

Lastly, my research aims to challenge and encourage East Asians in Hawai‘i to reevaluate their position as “locals” and examine the pervasive ideology of Hawai‘i as a racially harmonious state. Confronting narratives of liberal multiculturalism often employed by legislators, I hope that East Asians as both the general public and as scholars can receive this challenge with genuine inquiry rather than defense and hostility, opening rooms for tough conversations within our community and with Kanaka Maoli. Furthermore, my research pursues accountability for East Asian legislators, who utilize their positions for their own socioeconomic gains and not for the benefit of the people of Hawai‘i.

Counterarguments and Misconceptions

The concepts of race and racism and the study of Asian settler colonialism has met significant resistance and are often misconstrued by the general public and even prevalent scholars. Tackling misinformation often held by people, Desmond and Emirbayer (2016) counter five misconceptions about racism: individualistic, legalistic, tokenistic, ahistorical, and fixed fallacies. The individualistic fallacy only perceives racism on an individual level and fails to see its roots woven and reinforced within societal structures (p. 6). Related to institutions, the legalistic fallacy assumes that the abolition of racist laws leads to the elimination of racism altogether (p. 7). Likewise, the tokenistic fallacy presumes that racist obstacles in structures of power are absent due to the presence of people of color in positions of power. Thus, socio-economic disparities amongst people of color are to be blamed on themselves rather than the societal structures that embrace those inequalities. In regards to Hawai‘i, notions of the

islands as a “liberal multicultural state” are often employed by East Asian politicians, allowing the advancement of settler colonialism while masking the marginalization of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi (Darrah-Okike, 2020, p. 9). Moreover, the ahistorical fallacy postulates that the nation’s history of racism and oppression of people of color is irrelevant and inapplicable to today’s society (p. 8). The stories of subjugation are therefore left in the past and inconsequential of the issues that persist throughout the United States. Lastly, the fixed fallacy concludes that racism is constant and unchanging, thus, racism has diminished due to the lack of racial violence in today’s society.

Moreover, Asian scholars have taken issue with the study of Asian settler colonialism. These criticisms engaged by Asian liberals and scholars include (1) the idea of settler colonialism centered around Asians is neo-racist and advocates for the expulsion of Asian settlers as the solution, (2) the concept of Asians as settler colonialists is ahistorical, and (3) Kanaka ‘Ōiwi nationalism fosters enmity between Kanaka ‘Ōiwi and Asian settlers (Saranillio, 2013, pp. 283-284). However, as Saranillio (2013) asserts, Kanaka activists and scholars who, rather than call for the expulsion of Asians, instead urge Asian settlers to recognize the socioeconomic and political disparities that benefit those of East and Southeast Asian descent (p. 284). Additionally, the argument that Asian settler colonialism is ahistorical can be countered by examining a chronicle of Japanese imperialist activity, Japanese reaction towards the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, and the Territorial period, which was the power transition that transpired between white settlers and Asian liberals, thereby, creating a hegemonic political system (p. 286). Furthermore, Asian victimization through the employment of the term “local” amalgamates their experiences with Kanaka ‘Ōiwi, thus, conflating their subjugation under White supremacy (p. 288).

Potential Issues to Research

While conducting research, potential issues may arise as demographic or quantitative data may be lacking or misrepresenting. In an article from the *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Sasa and Yellow Horse (2021) explain that statistics and data collected about Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPI) further marginalizes and erases the group because it often undercounts the NHPI community, thus neglecting the social inequalities they face in discourse and public policy. This in turn affects (1) their representation in politics due to redistricting and gerrymandering, (2) the amount of resources they receive in health care, transportation, housing, and other public services, and (3) research regarding inequality in comparison to other communities of color (pp. 344-345). Additional structural barriers, such as the military, houselessness, and mass incarceration, can also lead to a misrepresentation in Census data (pp. 348-349).

Furthermore, the utilization of the term Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) alters data collection and contributes to the erasure of Kanaka ʻŌiwi. Conflating Asian American issues with those of Pacific Islander, the term is implemented in government websites and websites showing racial or ethnic demographics in the Hawaiʻi State Legislature. For instance, AAPI or API is utilized in the websites for the National Conference of State Legislatures and Rutgers University.

Methodology, Research Design, and Role of Researcher

Throughout my research, I will be conducting archival research, examining legislation, testimonies, newspapers, and first-hand accounts of Kanaka ʻŌiwi movements. I will specifically be looking at legislation from early statehood and contemporary legislation from a five-year

period (2017-2023). These pieces of legislation will specifically be about land developments on O‘ahu.

Under the mentorship of Dr. Dean Saranillio, I will be looking through, reading, analyzing, and comparing various primary source documents from the resources listed below.

Materials and Resources

My main resources and materials will be provided by the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa’s Hamilton Library, the Legislative Reference Bureau, and the Hawai‘i State Legislature website. Additional resources not found at the above organizations may be purchased online. Thus far, materials needed for research not found in the above sources include Patrick Wolfe’s *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnography Event*.

Research Ethics Statement

This proposed project does not require the utilization of human subjects, animals, or hazardous material. Additionally, it does not require any laboratory safety training as it is solely based on archival research. Thus, no safety or ethics training and certification is needed for this proposed project.

Timetable

Timetable is tentative and may be subject to change.

Conduct Research	Present - October 2023
Outline Thesis	November 22, 2023

Write ½ of Thesis	December 15, 2023
Final Draft Thesis	January 15, 2024
Final Draft Thesis Submission to Mentor and Committee Members	February 15, 2024
Upload Personal Statement and Resume	March 08, 2024
Final Honors Project Submission	March 08, 2024
Undergraduate Showcase	May 2024
Graduation	May 11, 2024

Appendix A

Ahupua‘a - land division from the mountain to the sea

‘Āina - land, earth

Haole - foreigner; term for an individual who is phenotypically white

Kanaka, Kanaka ‘Ōiwi, Kanaka Maoli - Native Hawaiian

Konohiki - the head of the ahupua‘a; not the chief

‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i - Hawaiian language

Maka‘āinana - people of the land

Moku - district

Mokupuni - island

Pae‘āina - group of islands

References

- Cooper, G., & Daws, G. (1985). *Land and power in Hawai‘i*. University of Hawai‘i Press.
- Darrah-Okike, J. (2020). Theorizing race in Hawai‘i: Centering place, indigeneity, and settler colonialism. *Sociology Compass*, 14(7), e12791.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12791><https://doi.org/10.21313/hawaii/9780824830151.003.0001>
- Desmond, M., & Emirbayer, M. (2016). *Race in America* (2nd ed., pp.1-37). W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Fogleman, C. (2018). *Demographic, social, economic and housing characteristics for selected race groups in Hawai‘i*. Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism (DBEDT).
https://files.hawaii.gov/dbedt/economic/reports/SelectedRacesCharacteristics_HawaiiReport.pdf.
- Fujikane, C. (2008). Introduction: Asian settler colonialism in the U.S. colony of Hawai‘i. In C. Fujikane & J. Y. Okamura (Eds.), *Asian settler colonialism* (pp. 1–42). University of Hawai‘i Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wr0h6.6>
- Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, N., Hussey, I., & Wright, E. K. (2014). *A nation rising: Hawaiian movements for life, land, and sovereignty*. Duke University Press.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uhm/detail.action?docID=1766831>
- Kamahele, M. (2008). ‘Īlio‘ulaokalani: Defending Native Hawaiian culture. In C. Fujikane & J. Y. Okamura (Eds.), *Asian settler colonialism* (pp. 76–98). University of Hawai‘i Press.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wr0h6.11>
- Kauanui, J.K. (2016). “A structure, not an event”: Settler colonialism and enduring indigeneity.

- Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*, 5(1).
- Land acknowledgement*. Native Hawaiian Place of Learning Advancement Office. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from <https://manoa.hawaii.edu/nhpol/auamo/land-acknowledgment/>
- Nā Maka o ka ‘Āina (Producers). (1993). *Act of war - The overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://oiwi.tv/oiwitv/act-war/>
- Osorio, J.K. (2002). *Disremembering lāhui: A history of the Hawaiian nation to 1887*. University of Hawai‘i Press.
- Sasa, S., & Yellow Horse, A.J. (2021). Just data representation for Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders: A critical review of systemic Indigenous erasure in census and recommendations for psychologists. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 69(3), 343-354. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12569>
- Saranillio, D.I. (2013). Why Asian settler colonialism matters: A thought piece on critiques, debates, and Indigenous difference. *Settler Colonial Studies*, 3(3), 280-294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2013.810697>
- Takaki, R. (1989). *Strangers from a different shore*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Trask, H.-K. (2008). Settlers of color and “immigrant” hegemony. In C. Fujikane & J. Y. Okamura (Eds.), *Asian settler colonialism* (pp. 45–65). University of Hawai‘i Press. <https://doi.org/10.21313/hawaii/9780824830151.003.0001>
- Wolfe, P. (2006). Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8(4), 387–409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>