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Development and Decadent Time in Nineteenth-Century Hawai'i

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The Hawai'i of literary renown seems to exist outside the normal flow of time. Charles Warren Stoddard, in his memoir *Hawaiian Life: Lazy Letters from Low Latitudes* (1894), recalls the beautiful 'boat-boy of Lahaina' in just such temporally ambiguous terms: although the travel writer had not seen the native youth in years, Stoddard muses that 'the finger of Time doubles up the moment it points toward him', so that 'he must be still lying in wait for me, [...] not a day older, not a particle changed'.¹ In the case of Hawai'i, this pervasive trope of stasis exists in tension with alternative and often contradictory models of time as cyclical, regressive, and even hyper-accelerated, such that Hawaiian history appears to unfold in fits and starts, jumping forward and looping backward in ways that resist linear understandings of progress. Later in *Hawaiian Life*, for instance, Stoddard reflects on the fate of Kane-Pihi, a local fisherman who in the span of a few months transforms from a 'gentle savage' into a streetwise petty thief and eventual convict.² For Stoddard, Kane-Pihi's rapid evolution – which ends with his ignominious death in prison – recreates in miniature the story of a race doomed to collapse under the weight of modernity and its steady drumbeat of 'development'.³

As Robert Stilling, Matthew Potolsky, Regenia Gagnier, and other scholars of global decadence have shown us, these evocations of a decadent or otherwise non-normative historical trajectory are not unique to the Pacific, but rather characteristic of colonial cultures in the age of imperial decline. This article seeks to complicate our understanding of this global decadence by situating historiography about and from Hawai'i vis-à-vis what Stilling, in his study of postcolonial anti-decadence, describes as the 'temporality of empire'.⁴ To do so, I draw on work by the aforementioned scholars as well as Kristin Mahoney, Dennis Denisoff, and others who have recently expanded our definition of the movement to include a wider range of milieus, authors,

and forms. I am particularly indebted to Potolsky and Gagnier, who conceive of decadence not as a shared set of artistic values – that is, decadence as practised among the coteries of fin-de-siècle London and Paris – but rather as a ‘stance’ (to quote Potolsky) bred out of the friction of economic, political, and technological modernization.⁵ More precisely, Gagnier defines decadence as a dialectical response to transnational contact, in which cultures ‘looked at, reified, and fetishized each other.’⁶ This more expansive view of decadence, as I’ll suggest, allows us to recognize the diffuse decadent discourses surrounding Hawai‘i in the later nineteenth century, when the islands were not only popularly associated with the quintessentially decadent affects of languor and ennui, but also seen to both embody and resist the forces of geopolitical modernity.⁷

In what follows, I highlight one expression of that decadence: a vexed sense of time, evident in Stoddard’s travel narrative, which runs counter to bedrock Victorian principles of progress and improvement. To Anglo-American travel writers, ethnographers, and armchair historians, Hawai‘i promised perpetual afternoon, even as its people sped through the theorized natural lifecycle of a society, proceeding from ‘savagery’ through civilization to an over-ripened decadence in mere decades. The islands’ complicated temporal status – with rapid development and supposed degeneration counterpoised against its seeming changelessness – in turn both confirmed and contested already strained nineteenth-century theories about societal evolution. Thus, Hawai‘i’s nonconformity to the expected ambit of history found Western literary expression not only in decadent images, motifs, and idioms, but also in a more generalized decadent sensibility – one characterized by an anxious, sometimes seriocomic scepticism of liberal progressive teleology. As I make this argument, however, I want to be conscientious of overstretching decadence in ways that might occlude or flatten *Kanaka Maoli* [Native Hawaiian] literatures, which include a significant corpus of late nineteenth-century historiography written in ‘*ōlelo Hawai‘i* [the Hawaiian language]. By way of conclusion, I’ll turn to a small subset of this historiography to consider how it might be animated by overlapping, but nonetheless separate, conceptions of

decadent time. The paradigms of decadence which we find in that historiography, though comparable in some ways to Euro-American decadence, reveal commitments and concerns unique to a still-independent nation under the duress of colonialism. Hawai‘i thus presents a kind of test case for the global turn in Victorian studies, demonstrating the limits as well as the possibilities of our discipline’s expanding ken.

On Decadent Time

Writing particularly about the French tradition, Leonard R. Koos remarks that ‘decadence, if not historiographical in the most literal sense of the word, always maintains an implicit reference to the process, however catastrophic, of history’.⁸ Koos traces this ‘historiographical model of decadence’ to the Enlightenment, and more precisely to two seminal accounts of Rome’s collapse: Montesquieu’s *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734) and Edward Gibbon’s six-volume *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1788). In their own time, Koos argues, Montesquieu’s and Gibbon’s respective histories cemented an enduring association between decadence and the trajectory of empire, and in so doing also ‘presented a serious challenge to the Enlightenment project of progress and civilization’.⁹ Likewise, Charlotte Roberts identifies a different, but related, tension inherent in the reception of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* specifically: in the popular imagination, his opus stands as a ‘solid and imposing [...] articulation of history as synchronic, comprehensive, monumental, and singular’, even as the process of its composition suggests a view of the past as instead ‘diachronic, iterative, exploratory, and plural’.¹⁰ In its earliest iterations, then, decadence bears within itself this vexing contradiction. On the one hand, decadence lends structure to history by helping to codify a messy confluence of events into linear, causal sequence. On the other hand, decadence as a material historical phenomenon ‘looms menacingly’ (to quote Koos) behind the Enlightenment doctrine of human perfectibility, threatening the inevitable collapse of every civilization, no matter how rationally constructed.

The nineteenth-century advent of evolutionary anthropology complicated this tension in ways that had profound implications for Victorian retellings of Indigenous history. For my own relatively modest purposes here, I would call attention to two influential concepts that were foundational to this anthropology: namely, the theory of the social organism, which held that societies arose, developed, and decayed in a manner akin to the single organism, and the notion of psychic unity, which held that innate mental capacity was the same across all human races.¹¹ The organic analogy allowed anthropologists to locate the cultures they studied on a sliding scale of development keyed also to the individual lifecycle, ranging from primitive childhood to civilized adulthood to decadent old age; psychic unity further entailed that all human societies passed through roughly the same stages along the scale.¹² In conjunction, these ideas gave rise to the pervasive assumption – implied, if not expressly cited, in much nineteenth-century writing about Hawai‘i – that contemporary non-white peoples were ‘stuck’ at the same level of development as children and ancient Europeans. This assumption formed the methodological basis for Edward Burnett Tylor’s landmark two-volume study *Primitive Culture* (1871): ‘It may be taken as a maxim of ethnology’, Tylor writes, ‘that what is done among civilized men in jest, or among civilized children in the nursery, is apt to find its analogue in the serious mental effort of savage, and therefore of primaeval tribes’.¹³ Broadly speaking, the racial hierarchy implied by Tylor’s maxim lent validity to the particularly paternalistic form of imperialism that Rudyard Kipling would later enshrine as the ‘White Man’s Burden’, and Patrick Wolfe points out that evolutionary anthropology as a whole developed in tandem with shifts in colonial policy from outright genocide and resource exploitation toward a purportedly more humane cultural and political assimilation.¹⁴ In the strain of Western historiography I address in this essay, this Tylorian evolutionary logic motivates standard narratives of Hawai‘i’s progression from pre-contact ‘savagery’ to post-contact civilization.¹⁵

Take, for example, Hawai‘i-born non-native folklorist Nathaniel Bright Emerson’s *Unwritten Literature of Hawaii: The Sacred Songs of the Hula* (1909), a lay history of Hawaiian music and dance published under the imprimatur of the Smithsonian Institution’s Bureau of American Ethnology. In the preface to his book, Emerson states that one of his chief goals is to prove that ‘savages are only children of a younger growth than ourselves’, and ‘that what we find them to have been we ourselves – in our ancestors – once were’.¹⁶ He reiterates this again some pages later when he compares the pre-contact Hawaiian mindset to the ‘unconscious naiveté of a child’, which ‘hark[ens] back to a period that was close to the world’s infancy’.¹⁷ Certainly, Emerson’s repeated framing of ancient Hawaiians as noble savages reflects a broader American fascination with Indigenous cultures that surged at the very moment of their supposed extermination. In this context, and as historian Kathryn Gin Lum has argued, Emerson’s career as the self-appointed ‘rescuer from oblivion of Hawaiian folkways’ was not at odds with his staunchly pro-annexation stance.¹⁸ But Emerson’s nostalgia is also strategic, a means of situating contemporary Indigeneity – peoples, practices, and beliefs that remained alive and well despite efforts to stamp them out – in a precursory position within a progressive historical trajectory ending in US imperial hegemony. In his study, Emerson sets out to resurrect what he describes, in Arnoldian terms, as the lost ‘sweetness and light’ of pre-modern Hawaiian life, without having either to concede the illusion of American superiority or to compromise his overarching goal of assimilation (‘it is not so much what the primitive man can give us’, he reasons at one point, ‘as what we can find in him that is worth our while’).¹⁹ The US takeover of Hawai‘i appears, in light of his racial hierarchy, not the result of years of concerted political and economic scheming, but rather the happy culmination of evolutionary destiny, in which the backward native is integrated into the linear time of an enlightened empire on the rise.

This might have appeared a sound presumption to Emerson in 1909, writing over a decade after the US had annexed the islands in 1898. But for most of the nineteenth century, the question

of whether Hawai'i would maintain its independence or be taken over by one of the colonial powers – the subject of much speculation among Anglo-American observers – was far from settled. Its fate was made more uncertain by its unique socio-political circumstances: Hawai'i was and is distinct from other Pacific Island groups for a number of reasons that have bearing on its perceived place within a racial hierarchy. Hawaiian studies scholar Noenoe K. Silva reminds us that Hawai'i is 'not a postcolonial but a (neo?) colonial state'.²⁰ Until the forced abdication of Queen Lydia Lili'uokalani in 1893, Hawai'i was an independent constitutional monarchy with a sophisticated governmental infrastructure, an extensive education system, a robust multilingual periodical press, and a richly cosmopolitan national culture. Despite its size, the Kingdom also commanded considerable respect on the global stage, in part because of a sustained campaign – intensified by Lili'uokalani's brother and predecessor David Kalākaua – to build a sprawling network of consulates and embassies. As Lorenz Gonschor explains, the Kingdom was the sole non-Western nation in this period to have secured full diplomatic recognition from the Western powers, and its status as the most conventionally developed country in Oceania made it a beacon for other nascent Indigenous nations in Polynesia.²¹ In other words, the cultural and political assimilation that Emerson represented as evolutionarily predetermined was, for those writing in the nineteenth century, still tenuous and prospective.

To be sure, the Hawaiian Kingdom's myriad strengths did not prevent late Victorian observers from prognosticating its impending decline. Pronouncements on the inevitable extinction of Indigenous Hawaiians (and, presumably, the collapse of their Kingdom) are commonplace in travel writing and ethnography from this period: such predictions speak to the particularly potent branch of imperialist ideology that Patrick Brantlinger terms 'extinction discourse', which gained strength after Charles Darwin applied his arguments about natural selection to available data on population collapse among Indigenous peoples.²² I have written elsewhere about the relationship between decadence and extinction discourse in travel writing

about Hawai‘i, but here I would highlight the ways in which the possibility of extinction was mapped onto evolutionary notions of individual and collective development.²³ Brantlinger observes that the ‘demise of “savagery” throughout the world’ was ‘understood [...] as necessary for social progress’, a view reinforced by Darwinian anthropologists and espoused even by writers, such as Stoddard, who otherwise supported Indigenous self-determination.²⁴ As we have already seen in Stoddard’s panegyric to the late Kane-Pihi – a moment to which I’ll return shortly – extinction discourse was also characterized by what Brantlinger describes as a sense of ‘proleptic elegy, sentimentally or mournfully expressing [...] the confidence of self-fulfilling prophecy’.²⁵ Manley Hopkins’s *Hawaii: The Past, Present, and Future of its Island Kingdom* (1862), a popular history he wrote while serving as the Kingdom’s consul-general in London, gives voice to this peculiar blend of reformist optimism and morbid sympathy. In the preface, Hopkins writes of his hope ‘that something useful may be learned’ from the ‘biography’ of this nation, ‘in which we have before us the life of a community, its efforts, its errors, its failures, its escapes, its repentances; its vivacious childhood, its noon-day struggles, and – must we add? – its instructed but premature decay’.²⁶ For Hopkins, the imminent extinction of the Hawaiian people is not so lamentable a fact that it cannot be redeemed, in some measure, by its utility as an example for other nations navigating the same turbulent waters.

Hawai‘i and the Anti-Telos of Decadent Time

In writing about Hawai‘i, however, this prophetic confidence in the inevitability of progress continually runs up against a multitude of contradictory temporal models. As many outsiders noted, the Kingdom was a patently self-sufficient nation with a state apparatus on par with the modern constitutional monarchies of Europe. The travel writer Isabella Bird acknowledges as much in her popular travelogue *The Hawaiian Archipelago* (1874), in which she credits Hawai‘i with ‘one of the best administered governments in the world’, complete with a ‘liberal sovereign’ and ‘equable and enlightened laws [...] impartially administered’.²⁷ At the same time, almost every

Anglo-American memoirist and historian remarks on the islands' seeming *resistance* to progress, often articulating its allure through allusions to Alfred Tennyson's dramatic monologue 'The Lotus-Eaters' (1832). Like the island of Tennyson's poem, 'a land where all things always seem'd the same', Hawai'i's stable climate lulls both visitors and natives into a self-satisfied indolence – in Hopkins's words, an 'enervation in the human system' that breeds a "lotus-eating" condition of mind'.²⁸ Bird, writing in the 1870s, paints a charming portrait of a 'sunset world of endless afternoon', where residents 'dream away their lives' in the halcyon sunshine; forty years later, in his travel memoir *The Cruise of the Snark* (1911), Jack London would use the same myth to evoke the dreamy luxuriance of a meal partaken on his host's 'lotus-eating verandah' in Honolulu, an oasis after weeks of hard sailing from San Francisco.²⁹ The political upheaval of the intervening years – two coups, a monarchist counter-rebellion, annexation – could not dispel the pervasive fantasy of stasis that constituted a large part of Hawai'i's cultural appeal.

The disruptive potential of these cross-cutting paradigms – Hawaiians as simultaneously 'children of a younger growth', citizens of a modern liberal state, and perpetual lotus-eating decadents – is perhaps most apparent in travelogues and histories that seek to account for Hawai'i's geopolitical situation. To the extent that this temporal confusion exists in dialectical relation (to once again borrow Regenia Gagnier's formulation) with modern globalization, I contend that we can consider these disruptive temporalities in themselves decadent, even when we find them in work that lies far outside the strict bounds of the movement. Looking specifically at Walter Pater's late essays, Matthew Potolsky defines a characteristically 'decadent historiography' in terms of its resistance, in the vein of Walter Benjamin, to a conception of 'history as a grand and fateful [...] march toward the present'.³⁰ As Dennis Denisoff further argues in his recent study of decadent ecology, many decadents reworked and subverted 'discourses of alliance, colonization, and refinement that were used to naturalize the rise and fall of civilizations'; 'contrary to the common tendency to incorporate decay within a model of development or an idealistic holism', he observes

later, this strain of decadence ‘refuses an implicit teleology toward a collective harmony’.³¹ In the travel writing and ethnography I highlight here, the teleology of empire de-coheres in the solvent of both political reality and settler fantasy. I suggest that this anti-telos constitutes a kind of immanent decadence, one that is only recognizable if we are willing to extend our scrutiny beyond the usual decadent networks.

Bird’s attestations to the islands’ ‘thoroughly civilized polity’,³² for example, clash with claims she makes elsewhere about the spectre of extinction, as well as her own desire to succumb to Hawai‘i’s ‘indolent and aimless [way of] life, in which time is of no account’.³³ These contradictions persist into the final lines of her memoir, in which she expresses an earnest wish that

this people, which has advanced from heathenism and barbarism to Christianity and civilization in the short space of a single generation, may enjoy peace and prosperity under King Kalakaua, that the extinction which threatens the nation may be averted, and that under a gracious Divine Providence, Hawaii may still remain the inheritance of the Hawaiians.³⁴

In charting Hawai‘i’s progress through successive cultural stages, Bird ascribes to a model of development in which its people have progressed – through a combination of initiative, divine favour, and missionary guidance – into its hard-won, independent maturity. But Hawai‘i’s ‘wonderful leap’³⁵ forward is shadowed by the twin threats of atavism (the Kingdom has already had to ‘fall back’, she observes, ‘on the old world resource of a standing army’)³⁶ and premature obsolescence (on the subject of Kalākaua’s election to the throne, she remarks that Hawai‘i is already ‘king-making by paper ballots’, which is an ‘approximation to president-making’; she posits US annexation as the natural, if regrettable, next step in this trajectory).³⁷ In Bird’s telling, the sheer rapidity of Hawai‘i’s development, contrasted with its lotus-eating languor, would seem to demonstrate the precarity of Westernization itself. It is in this context that she couches her well-wishes for the nation in an ambivalent subjunctive.

For Mark Twain, who spent four months in the islands in 1866 and continued writing about his experiences for decades afterward, Hawai‘i furnished the occasion for more comedic, but similarly unresolved, interrogations of progress. Brian Collins, in his analysis of Twain’s letters from the islands, explains how Twain played on his readers’ anxieties about ‘not savagery precisely’, but a kind of ‘semi-civilization’ exemplified in Hawai‘i’s ‘highly syncretic culture’.³⁸ In his memoir *Roughing It* (1872), Twain capitalizes on the incongruities of this semi-civilization in an extended anecdote about Kekūanaō‘a, father of then-reigning monarch Kamehameha V and presiding officer of the legislature. Although now a ‘white haired, tawny old gentlemen’, Twain reflects that

this man, naked as the day he was born, and war-club and spear in hand, has charged at the head of a horde of savages against other hordes of savages more than a generation and a half ago, and reveled in slaughter and carnage [...] [A]nd now look at him: an educated Christian, neatly and handsomely dressed; a high-minded, elegant gentleman, [...] a man practiced in holding the reins of an enlightened government, and well versed in the politics of his country and in general, practical information. Look at him [...] as seemingly natural and fitted to the place as if he had been born in it and had never been out of it in his lifetime.³⁹

Regarding this passage, Collins argues that Twain’s depiction of Kekūanaō‘a allows him to explore the ‘savagery [that] persists beneath a thin surface of civilized “affectations”’ while keeping his American readers insulated from self-reflection.⁴⁰ Situated within an evolutionary context, we can also see how Twain literalizes the organic analogy: the social development of an entire people is writ small in the lifetime of one of its members, whose very existence testifies to both the irresistible might of progress and the tenuousness of its results. Twain continues to wring humour out of that paradox in his eviscerating account of Hawaiian governmental officials, from ‘his royal Majesty the King, with a New York detective’s income of thirty or thirty-five thousand dollars a year’, to ‘his Excellency the Minister of the Navy [...] who rules the “royal fleet” (a steam-tug and a sixty-ton schooner)’.⁴¹ Princes, stewards, governors, envoys, and ministers – each dressed in the ‘gorgeous vari-colored, gold-laced uniform peculiar to his office’ – march in a grotesque parade that emblemizes the florid and impotent artifice not only of this ‘play-house “kingdom”’, but also of monarchy in general.⁴² In Twain’s memoir, the historical pressures that transformed a

primitive warrior into an elegant gentleman have catapulted the nation into an enervated, hedonistic decadence.

But Twain, like many others, also memorializes Hawai‘i as a space exempt from that kind of change. In 1889, the humourist concluded a speech with an impromptu tribute to the islands, which the New York *Sun* later published as a ‘prose poem’:

No other land could so longingly and beseechingly haunt me, sleeping and waking, through half a lifetime, as that one has done. Other things leave me, but it abides; other things change, but it remains the same. For me its balmy airs are always blowing, its summer seas flashing in the sun; the pulsing of its surfbeat is in my ear [...] in my nostrils still lives the breath of flowers that perished twenty years ago.⁴³

While its tonal earnestness marks a departure from his archly ironic travel literature, Twain’s prose poem underscores the temporal instability that typifies his writing on Hawai‘i. Where *Roughing It* presents an aspiring archipelagic empire that has accelerated too quickly through the stages of civilization, the prose poem amplifies a stock comparison between Hawai‘i and the unchanging island of Tennyson’s lotus eaters. Seen in isolation, the shift is in part attributable to Twain’s own experience of time: for the Twain of 1889, now well into middle age, Hawai‘i is a spatial mnemonic for his bygone youth. In conjunction with fin-de-siècle travel literature and ethnography more broadly, however, these inconsistencies form a pattern of racialized anxieties about degeneration, modernization, and globalization, which are projected and staged against a Hawaiian backdrop.

These anxieties are especially palpable in Charles Warren Stoddard’s aforementioned 1894 memoir *Hawaiian Life*, one of several books he wrote about his time there in the 1870s and 1880s. A fervent admirer of Walt Whitman and sometime protégé of Twain’s, Stoddard belonged to a circle of aesthetic- and decadent-adjacent bohemians based mostly in San Francisco; he was particularly close with the Japanese writer Yone Noguchi, with whom he developed a passionate and ambiguously romantic friendship.⁴⁴ His lifelong love for Polynesia was driven in part by what Noguchi’s biographer, Amy Sueyoshi, fairly describes as the American writer’s lifelong ‘fetish for young men from the Pacific Rim’ – a fetish that drew him to a series of beautiful Hawaiian youths,

including the ageless ‘boat-boy of Lahaina’ and the fisherman Kane-Pihi.⁴⁵ Additionally, Stoddard’s view of Hawai‘i as a queer sexual utopia – a view consistent with long-standing Western constructions of Polynesia – resonated with his polemical anti-capitalism.⁴⁶ He addresses the spiritual and aesthetic vacuity of ‘mercantile pursuits’ most clearly in his depictions of plantation life in the company town of Spreckelsville on Maui.⁴⁷ There ‘the steam-plow is rampant’, and a ‘forest of smoke-stacks’ rises over the town instead of trees: ‘Progress’, he writes, ‘the ogre of the nineteenth century – Progress, with a precipitous *P*, – is the war-cry of Spreckelsville’.⁴⁸ In Hawai‘i, Stoddard saw a land resistant, albeit gradually succumbing, to the demoralizing grind of ‘this modern civilization’ and its ‘new diseases’.⁴⁹

As a victim to both proverbial and literal contagion, Kane-Pihi becomes a focal point for Stoddard’s reflections on modernity’s diseases. Like Twain in his sketch of Kekūanaō‘a, Stoddard projects onto Kane-Pihi’s biography the story of his entire people, and in doing so naturalizes a collective ‘doom’ that he fears is already ‘accomplished’.⁵⁰ More conscientiously than Twain, however, Stoddard contests an ideology of progress that would lionize that doom as a noble and necessary sacrifice for the sake of development. *Hawaiian Life* introduces Kane-Pihi via a frame narrative that establishes the stakes of his story: Stoddard, unable to focus on a book entitled ‘Evidences of Christianity’, abandons the volume for a stroll on the beach, where he stumbles upon ‘a youth just out of his teens, a slim, sleek creature, unconscious, unclad, sprawled inartistically, absorbing sunshine and apparently steeped to the toes in it’.⁵¹ On his first appearance, Kane-Pihi is not only primitive but primordial, an ‘amphibious’ ‘man-fish’ who amazes a smitten Stoddard with his prowess as a swimmer and diver.⁵² Stoddard’s descriptions of Kane-Pihi, although couched in the writer’s habitual mythological register, are in substance Darwinian: Kane-Pihi is ‘a perfect human animal’,⁵³ adapted to his semi-aquatic niche and constitutionally unsuited to the ‘method and industry’ of the town, or ‘anything so confining as a pavement or a trim garden spot’.⁵⁴ Stoddard also cheekily inverts religious and anthropological reformist logic when he asserts

that Kane-Pihi, with his ‘complete and unqualified success’ as an organism, ‘was doing what he could [...] towards destroying the last vestiges of the “Evidences of Christianity”’.⁵⁵ Kane-Pihi’s sheer fitness elevates him in an alternative developmental scale wherein Christianity, and Western civilization more generally, are relegated to the temporally subordinate position of ‘vestige’. In this anti-Tylorian hierarchy, it is the joyless regime of modern industry, not Kane-Pihi’s ‘savage’ vitality, which belongs properly to the past.

Things are quite different when Stoddard meets Kane-Pihi again, a decade later in real time but a mere five pages further into *Hawaiian Life*. During a chance visit to a local prison, Stoddard notices a particular inmate and inquires with the warden into the details of his life. Although the man’s rural upbringing left him with ‘no hope of development’, Stoddard explains, he might have lived in ‘perpetual happiness [...] if nature were to take her course’;⁵⁶ instead, the man was ‘seduced into the town’, and subsequently into a life of crime, by a charismatic missionary.⁵⁷ At this point, Stoddard reveals that the prisoner is ‘none other than my friend of yore completely transformed by civilization [...] Kane-Pihi, the man-fish, out of his element’.⁵⁸ Importantly, Stoddard’s explanation utilizes the elegiac rhetoric typical of extinction discourse while also rejecting its progressive telos. The root cause of Kane-Pihi’s downfall is not his incapacity to adjust to an uncongenial modernity – indeed, before his capture, the ‘man-fish’ had remade himself into ‘one of the cleverest boys in town’.⁵⁹ Rather, Stoddard mourns the fact that this once-perfect animal has adapted so well to modes of life structured around capitalist exploitation and greed. Kane-Pihi’s progression from exquisite waterman to consummate swindler, which Stoddard describes as a form of ‘backslid[ing]’, makes a mockery of mainstream Eurocentric conceptions of development;⁶⁰ as Stoddard puts it later, he ‘passed too rapidly from the simplicity of the savage to the duplicity of civilized man’.⁶¹ By muddling the temporal and moral dimensions of progress, Stoddard vacates Kane-Pihi’s domestication, and eventual death from smallpox, of any redemptive sociological purpose. He thus stakes his protest against US imperialism in the unruly decadent

temporalities that had long troubled literary attempts to wrangle the islands into the progressive mainstream of history.

Decadence, Hawaiian Historiography, and the Global Turn

‘Consensual national narratives’, as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz points out in the introduction to *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States* (2014), are an essential tool of the colonizer.⁶² In nineteenth-century Anglo-American writing, I’ve argued, Hawai‘i’s resistance to those narratives is registered in the decadent literary motif of temporal instability and breakdown. This motif both draws on and works against imperialist understandings of cultural development grounded in contemporary anthropology.

But ranged against this body of *haole* [foreign] literature was a wealth of *‘ōlelo Hawai‘i* historiography, much of it published serially in newspapers, in which Kanaka Maoli historians articulated alternative national narratives in their own native language. With the notable exceptions of David Malo and Samuel Kamakau, few of these historians have had significant portions of their work translated into English, and the vast majority of this archive remains inaccessible to scholars not fluent in Hawaiian. This is not necessarily a problem that requires addressing here: literary scholar ku‘ualoha ho‘omanawanui reminds us that, in contrast to Western academic epistemologies premised on singular authority and expertise, ‘traditional Kanaka Maoli ethics dictate a strong protocol of *kapu* (sacred, restricted, private) and *noa* (open, public)’, as well as a sensitivity to *makawalu* [multiple perspectives] and *kuleana* [responsibility].⁶³ It is not my *kuleana*, as a non-fluent Kanaka Maoli researcher, to call upon Hawaiian studies scholars to do the work of translating more of this material. Neither is it appropriate to make claims about nineteenth-century Hawaiian historiography based on the small segment of writing already available in translation.⁶⁴ It would be remiss of me, however, not to at least touch upon what little of this work has been translated – not to make a definitive argument about Hawaiian historiography (much less label it

decadent), but to gesture toward the ways in which socio-political upheaval found expression there in similarly non-linear representations of historical sequence.

In Kamakau's case, this non-linearity was so marked that it cast a long shadow on his posthumous reception. A judge and legislator as well as a prolific journalist, Kamakau contributed columns on Hawaiian history, religion, and folklore to various *'olelo Hawai'i* newspapers until his death in 1876; selections from his work were eventually translated and collected in four volumes published from the 1960s through the 1990s. As Puakea Nogelmeier observes, Kamakau's twentieth-century editors freely redacted, condensed, and reorganized his articles in order to lend "continuity" to a text that seemed to "jump about" in a Western sense'.⁶⁵ Translators also routinely simplified Kamakau's use of tenses, usually shifting instances of the Hawaiian present tense into English past tense. This had the effect of displacing contemporary, evolving Hawaiian cultural practices onto what Nogelmeier describes as the 'timelessness of the distant past'.⁶⁶

But translation has not entirely occluded the temporal nuance of Kamakau's work. In the snippets of his writing collected in *Ka Po'e Kahiko: The People of Old* (1964), the notoriously polemical Kamakau utilizes historical comparison as grounds for timely cultural critique.⁶⁷ At some junctures, the trajectory he draws is palpably degenerative: speaking of the dissolution of Hawai'i's native caste system, Kamakau asserts that 'the blood of lords has become mixed with the blood of *kaunua* [outcasts], and there is nothing that can cleanse it'.⁶⁸ 'Most of the spirits of this age are lying spirits', he remarks later, and the *'aumakua*, once helpful ancestral deities, 'have become bitter enemies who punish severely the faults of their descendants when they break a vow'.⁶⁹ He attributes this decadence, in part, to the moral complexities of life in a Westernized modernity: 'many, many more are the troubles of the [...] Hawaiian race in these times as compared to times past', meaning that it is correspondingly more difficult to expiate their 'entangled wrongs and faults' through traditional rituals.⁷⁰ This narrative of irreparable rupture with an Edenic past resonates, to a degree, with Stoddard's decadent anti-modernism, and indeed with the interpretation of colonial history that would come to be known as the 'fatal impact' thesis.⁷¹ At other moments, however, Kamakau

complicates this interpretation by calling into question the visitor's fantasy of a pre-contact Golden Age. A zealous Christian convert, Kamakau never depicts Western cultural influence as uniformly detrimental, and he analyses Hawai'i's ancient system of governance with measured ambivalence. His records abound with examples of 'vile' traditions – the 'useless' but 'profitable' practice of praying for vengeance,⁷² the 'evils' of abortion and infanticide⁷³ – that predate Cook's arrival. On the subject of ancient *kanawai* or chiefly decrees, he observes: 'some *kanawai* were wicked edicts that put men to death and shed blood to please the bloodletting gods [...] Others were laws that benefited the people and the kingdom, and were laws superior to those of any other kingdom on earth'.⁷⁴ Kamakau's judgements rely on transhistorical and transnational comparisons rather than a historicized scale of development, disclosing a view of Hawaiian history that is by turns cyclical, cataclysmic, and degenerative, but rarely, if ever, teleological. Crucially, too, that history is not calibrated against the timeline of European exploration; the moment of Western contact is merely one pivotal event among many.

Again, Kamakau's disruptive representations of time do not make his historiography necessarily decadent. As ho'omanawanui, Silva, David A. Chang, and others have argued, Kanaka Maoli writers such as Kamakau belong to an independent intellectual tradition that sought to forge a distinct national identity by moulding Western forms to Indigenous worldviews: in the midst of our discipline's turn to the global, we should be conscientious about enlisting non-Western writers into Western canons, lest we erase the claims to distinctiveness that were key to those anti-colonial nation-building efforts.⁷⁵ At the same time, and as scholars of the tradition have demonstrated, decadence emerged from globe-spanning conversations about the shape of things to come – conversations in which colonial writers had a major stake. The challenge in tracing these conversations lies in teasing out their common terms without eliding the specificities of their interlocutors. Kamakau's eschewal of developmental hierarchy is instructive in this regard. Placed alongside his English-language contemporaries, he speaks to the pervasive entanglement of literary

and anthropological discourses of decadence in this period, while also resisting the colonial logic that those discourses often empowered.

¹ Charles Warren Stoddard, *Hawaiian Life: Lazy Letters from Low Latitudes* (Chicago and New York: F. Tennyson Neely, 1894), p. 200.

² *Ibid.*, p. 218.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁴ Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 5.

⁵ Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p. 1.

⁶ Regenia Gagnier, 'From barbarism to decadence without the intervening civilization; or, living in the aftermath of anticipated futures', *Feminist Modernist Studies*, 4.2 (2021), 166-81 (p. 167).

⁷ In this sense, Native Hawaiians were consigned to a similarly anomalous temporal status as other native peoples, a phenomenon that Mark Rifkin describes as a 'double bind within dominant settler reckonings of time'. 'Either [native peoples] are consigned to the past', he writes in the preface to his recent book on settler time, 'or they are inserted into a present defined on non-native terms'. I would suggest that decadence, understood as a stance toward the modern, is particularly attuned to these contradictory temporal models. Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. vii.

⁸ Leonard R. Koos, 'Fictitious History: From Decadence to Modernism', in *The Turn of the Century: Modernism and Modernity in Literature and the Arts*, ed. by Christian Berg, Frank Durieux, and Geert Lernout (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), p. 120.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Charlotte Roberts, *Edward Gibbon and the Shape of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 2.

¹¹ As George Stocking explains, the theory of the social organism was expounded in the mid-1800s by evolutionary philosopher Herbert Spencer and later refined by sociologist Émile Durkheim. George Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), pp. 298-99.

¹² Psychic unity was central to much post-Darwinian anthropological thought; Stocking observes that the 'logic of sociocultural evolutionary argument required psychic unity as a premise upon which evolutionary sequences could be reconstructed'. Stocking, pp. 141-42.

¹³ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1871), I, p. 163.

¹⁴ Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999), pp. 130-31.

¹⁵ In this sense, what I describe in the Hawai'i context is similar to the historical anxieties that Wolfe identifies in ethnographic discourses surrounding Aboriginal peoples in Australia. At the nation's founding, he argues, the 'recalcitrant presence of Aborigines in the pores of the body politic' visibly refuted attempts to rewrite the new nation's history so as to efface its violent carceral origins. Wolfe, pp. 33-34.

¹⁶ Nathaniel Bright Emerson, *Unwritten Literature of Hawaii: The Sacred Songs of the Hula* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1909), p. 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁸ Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathens: Religion and Race in American History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), p. 198.

¹⁹ Emerson, p. 12.

²⁰ Noenoe K. Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 9.

²¹ Lorenz Gonschor, *A Power in the World: The Hawaiian Kingdom in Oceania* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), pp. 5, 15.

²² Patrick Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1830-1930* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 2.

²³ Lindsay Wilhelm, 'Bright Sunshine, Dark Shadows: Decadent Beauty and Victorian Views of Hawai'i', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 75 (2021), 495-526.

²⁴ Brantlinger, p. 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁶ Hopkins's younger brother Charles, a naturalized citizen of Hawai'i who rose to a cabinet position under Kamehameha III, had secured Manley's consulship back in London. Manley Hopkins was also the poet Gerard

- Manley Hopkins's father. Manley Hopkins, *Hawaii: The Past, Present, and Future of its Island Kingdom* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1862), p. xvi; Paul Mariani, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life* (New York: Viking, 2008), p. 24.
- ²⁷ Isabella Bird, *The Hawaiian Archipelago: Six Months Among the Palm Groves, Coral Reefs, and Volcanoes of the Sandwich Islands*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1876), p. 67.
- ²⁸ Alfred Tennyson, 'The Lotos-Eaters', *Poems*, 2 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1842), I, pp. 175-84 (p. 176); Hopkins, *Hawaii*, p. 31.
- ²⁹ Bird, p. 152; Jack London, *The Cruise of the Snark* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), p. 72.
- ³⁰ Matthew Potolsky, 'Pale Imitations: Walter Pater's Decadent Historiography', in *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, ed. by Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 235-53 (p. 251).
- ³¹ Dennis Denisoff, *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860-1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 32, p. 179.
- ³² Bird, p. 3.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 286.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 318.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 318.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- ³⁸ Brian Collins, 'Presidential Reconstructions: Mark Twain's Letters from Hawai'i and the Integration of Civil Society', *American Studies*, 37 (1996), 51-62 (p. 56).
- ³⁹ Mark Twain, *Roughing It*, ed. by Harriet Elinor Smith, et al. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 457-58.
- ⁴⁰ Collins, p. 57.
- ⁴¹ Twain, *Roughing It*, p. 464.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 465.
- ⁴³ Twain, 'Prose Poem', quoted in A. Grove Day, 'Introduction' to Mark Twain, *Mark Twain's Letters from Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1975), p. xiv.
- ⁴⁴ Roy Kotynek and John Cohassey, *American Cultural Rebels: Avant-Garde and Bohemian Artists, Writers and Musicians from the 1850s through the 1960s* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008), p. 22; Amy Sueyoshi, *Queer Compulsions: Race, Nation, and Sexuality in the Affairs of Yone Noguchi* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), p. 4.
- ⁴⁵ Sueyoshi, p. 16.
- ⁴⁶ As Lee Wallace argues, 'imperial expansion in the Pacific has been imagined as a sexual event' from the moment of contact; he further contends that the most 'sexually resonant figure inscribed within the representational archive of the Pacific is that of the male body'. For discussions of Stoddard's place within a tradition of homoerotic South Seas travel literature and film, see also Justin Edwards and Jeffrey Geiger. Lee Wallace, *Sexual Encounters: Pacific Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 1; Justin Edwards, *Exotic Journeys: Exploring the Erotics of U. S. Travel Literature, 1840-1930* (Hanover and London: University of New Hampshire Press, 2001), pp. 33-47; Jeffrey Geiger, *Facing the Pacific: Polynesia and the U. S. Imperial Imagination* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), pp. 192-226.
- ⁴⁷ Stoddard, p. 97.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-78.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 210.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 212-13.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 213.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 222.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 218.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 222.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 228.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 230.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 229.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 236.
- ⁶² Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), p. 2.
- ⁶³ ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui, *Voices of Fire: Reweaving the Literary Lei of Pele and Hi'iaka* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. xxxi.
- ⁶⁴ An over-reliance on translated sources has resulted in what Puakea Nogelmeier calls a 'discourse of sufficiency', in which these limited sources are taken as 'sufficient to embody nearly a hundred years of extensive Hawaiian auto-representation'. M. Puakea Nogelmeier, *Mai Pa'a I Ka Leo: Historical Voice in Hawaiian Primary Materials, Looking Forward and Listening Back* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 2010), pp. 1-2.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 134.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 137.

⁶⁷ Nogelmeier explains that Kamakau was more ‘adamant about his qualifications to authority than many other writers of his time’, and he often engaged in heated debates with his readers about the accuracy of his accounts. Nogelmeier, pp. 109-18.

⁶⁸ Samuel Kamakau, *Ka Po'e Kabiko: The People of Old*, trans. by Mary Kawena Pukui, ed. by Dorothy B. Barrère (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1991), p. 9.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 55.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

⁷¹ This thesis, which proposes that Indigenous societies were destroyed by Western contact, derives its name from Alan Moorehead's 1966 book *The Fatal Impact: An Account of the Invasion of the South Pacific, 1767-1840*.

⁷² Kamakau, *The People of Old*, p. 36.

⁷³ Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs of Hawaii*, rev. ed. (Honolulu: Kamehameha Schools Press, 1992), p. 234.

⁷⁴ Kamakau, *The People of Old*, p. 14.

⁷⁵ See David A. Chang, *The World and All the Things Upon It: Native Hawaiian Geographies of Exploration* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Noenoe K. Silva, *The Power of the Steel-Tipped Pen: Reconstructing Native Hawaiian Intellectual History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).