

Heeding the local women's warning

Expansive subalternity in Kristiana Kahakauwila's *This Is Paradise*

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Introduction

“She is lying on her side, her right arm tucked beneath her ear, her back turned to us. People sleep out on the beach all the time: drifters, druggies, drunks, runaways, lovers, and tourists too lost or high to care if they make it back to their hotels. We’re not sure if we should disturb her, but something in the absolute stillness of her body makes us move toward her. [...] We lean over her and place our hands on the wet cotton of her dress. We shake her gently. ‘Wake up,’ we tell her. ‘It’s morning.’ She doesn’t stir. She is heavy in our hands. We command her to get up, to move, but she doesn’t listen. When we touch her bare arm, her skin is cold. We jump away from her, startled. Her skin is too cold.”¹

Early in the morning, on Waikīkī Beach, Honolulu, Hawai’i, a group of hotel housekeepers finds a white mainland American woman named Susan lying murdered and presumably raped on the shore. The housekeepers constitute one of the three groups of protagonists in Kristiana Kahakauwila’s short story ‘This Is Paradise’ (2013). Contrary to the protagonists who identify as Hawai’ian, the housekeepers are unnamed. We only know that they have children, collect items left behind by careless hotel guests, and hail from Micronesia.² Literary scholar Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega refers to them as “the subaltern staff.” Drawing on the work by literary critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, she uses the term ‘subaltern’ to refer to those whose voices are not (easily) heard because they are either entirely absent or obfuscated. To the hotel guests, for instance, the housekeepers are subalterns because the empty ‘*Alohas*’ – that they are required to utter as if Hawai’ian were their native tongue – conceal their actual predicament, perspective, and identity.³ To the reader, conversely, these women are the protagonists sharing their views on the tourist lying voiceless on the beach – or, in their words, on the “American girl” whose corpse they encircle and protect as “*mothers*”.⁴

In ‘This Is Paradise’, unnamed Micronesian housekeepers have authority over a narrative tracing the last day of a dead-silent white citizen of the United States. Kahakauwila explains that she chose to invert the “gaze” of her short story collection in order to foreground and “value” Natives’ and locals’ rather than visitors’ perspectives on Hawai’i.⁵ Largeaud-

¹ Kristiana Kahakauwila, *This Is Paradise* (New York: Hogarth, 2013), 38. ‘This Is Paradise’ is the name of both the short story this essay discusses and the collection in which it is published.

² *Ibid.*, 11-12, 14.

³ Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega, “Occupy Waikīkī: pushing the borders of land, sea and story-telling in Kristiana Kahakauwila’s *This is Paradise* (2013),” *Archivio antropologico mediterraneo* 24, no. 2 (2022): 6.

⁴ Kahakauwila, *This Is Paradise*, 12-13, 39, emphasis in the original.

⁵ Kristiana Kahakauwila, “Novels Masquerading as Stories: An Interview with Kristiana Kahakauwila,” interview by Tyler McMahon, *Fiction Writers Review*, July 8, 2013,

Ortega, therefore, argues for reading ‘This Is Paradise’ as a “deconstruction of the hegemonic colonial discourse that says that Oceania ‘is paradise’ and that constructs the *hula* girl as an object for male consumption.”⁶ Building on this premise, this essay asks how the deconstruction of Hawai’i as a tourist’s paradise affects the characterization of Susan, the third-person addressee of the first-person protagonists. Interpreting Susan as a stand-in for all white, female, mainland American tourists commonly encountered by hotel housekeepers, this essay reads the story as a message to such women. By portraying Susan as a victim, this essay argues, the story conveys that even those who are usually ‘heard’ in tourism – i.e., the guests – are not immune to the gendered violence pervading a space like Hawai’i, where tourism and militarism are closely intertwined.⁷

Anticolonial feminism and Pacific Islander literature

The short story’s message to tourists such as Susan – i.e., to middle- to upper-class white American women – is part of a larger trend within Pacific Islander literature foregrounding the commonalities between women, rather than between those who share ethnic, national, or racial backgrounds. This body of literature responds to gendered issues in the Pacific’s anticolonial and antinuclear movements. According to literary scholars Rebecca Hogue and Anaïs Maurer, it expresses an anticolonial feminism that distinguishes itself from “white feminism” by privileging care for future generations over increasing the socio-economic mobility of individual women. Hogue and Maurer interpret this feminism as an attempt by female Pacific Islander activists to forge new alliances after their voices were moved toward the background of anticolonial and antinuclear movements. Although women had spearheaded these movements during the 1980s and 1990s, Hogue and Maurer explain, their leadership positions have since been taken by men. After rising to power and acquiring political offices, these male representatives incrementally traded the prospect of substantive change for monetary compensation by foreign actors, sacrificing island space for military installations, tourism, and natural resource extraction. The former (and female) leaders of the movements have responded

<https://fictionwritersreview.com/interview/novels-masquerading-as-stories-an-interview-with-kristiana-kahakauwila/>.

⁶ Largeaud-Ortega, “Occupy Waikīkī,” 1.

⁷ See Kahakauwila, *This Is Paradise*, 23, describing Susan’s murderer as someone who looks like he is in the Air Force or Navy. For the connection between militarism and tourism, see, e.g., Teresia Teaiwa, “Postscript: Reflections on Militourism, US Imperialism, and American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2016): 847-853.

to their disenfranchisement by turning to literature. In their poetry and prose, they explore the injustices perpetrated by men trying to balance anticolonial politics with the exploitation of the natural world, the marginalization of women, and their willingness to condone or engage in gendered violence.⁸

Like the poems discussed by Hogue and Maurer, 'This Is Paradise' grapples with militarism, tourism, and gendered violence. Furthermore, it interprets these themes from a feminist perspective, portraying women as the victims of these three issues separately and combined. By only having the local women recognize the danger facing Susan in 'paradise', the story appeals to female audiences, asking them to align with fellow women rather than with fellow tourists, for their own safety. Furthermore, the story reinterprets upper- and middle-class women as victims of the tourist industry without obfuscating that their financial choices keep this industry alive. Portraying Susan as a woman first and as a white middle- to upper-class mainland American tourist second, the story foregrounds the aspects that make her vulnerable. As she brushes off local women's concerns before walking to her death, she becomes a victim of her false consciousness, which precludes her from perceiving herself as part of the subaltern class of women whose voices are obfuscated.⁹ This essay interprets Susan's inability to recognize herself as a prospective victim of gendered violence as a message to female audiences outside of Hawai'i. By portraying white mainland American women as part of the subaltern class, this essay argues, 'This Is Paradise' encourages these women to contemplate their commonalities with Pacific Islander women. The recognition of such commonalities lends itself to the forging of alliances between disparate groups of women, who could support each other in their efforts to guard themselves against the militarism, tourism, and gendered violence that lurks beneath the surface of paradisiacal destinations such as Hawai'i.

Expansive subalternity in 'This Is Paradise'

In her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' literary scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak probed historians' ability to accurately represent colonized women. Emphasizing that these women

⁸ Rebecca Hogue and Anaïs Maurer, "Pacific women's anti-nuclear poetry: centring Indigenous knowledges," *International Affairs* 98, no. 4, (2022): 1270, 1274-1277, 1280-1282.

⁹ In the Marxist sense. See Editors of The Encyclopaedia Britannica, "false consciousness," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/false-consciousness>, explaining 'false consciousness' as the inability to recognize one's oppression as a result of one's unwarranted alignment with the dominant class.

were spoken *for* by colonial administrators, foreign correspondents, and colonized men, she complicated the use of official records to reconstruct their histories. Spivak supported her argument by tracing historians' consecutive misinterpretations of the practice of *Sati*, in which Indian women puzzled European onlookers as they burned themselves alive on their late husbands' funeral piles.¹⁰ Because Spivak made her case by discussing historians' inability to understand these women's motives, some read her text as exclusively addressing historians researching those who do not speak directly in the records. As anthropologist Rosalind Morris observes, however, Spivak has emphasized that the question of whether the subaltern can speak (and thus be understood) is also a theoretical question, which means that it should be of importance to those researching the present too. Furthermore, Morris notes that Spivak has insisted that she analyzed *Sati* as a representation of global processes, including those outside of strictly colonial contexts.¹¹

Understanding the question of subalternity as a theoretical question allows us to examine whether the characters in 'This Is Paradise' can be interpreted as subalterns. In line with the anticolonial feminism described by Hogue and Maurer, the Micronesian housekeepers express their agency by embodying a care-based feminism that privileges care for younger generations over concerns about individual women's socio-economic mobility. Disregarding their lower socio-economic status, they identify as caretakers and try to protect Susan's corpse. Upon first meeting Susan, they note that she reminds them of their eldest daughters and decide that "the American girl" brings them luck.¹² Hence, they interpret the world around them as they see fit, even if this requires them to subvert the power dynamics of Hawai'ian tourism. Although Susan is the financially privileged white American guest of the resort they work for, the housekeepers do not view her as someone having power over them. Instead, they perceive her as a 'girl' reminiscent of their daughters – i.e., as someone in need of their care – although her dollars are funneled into the hotel business upon which the housekeepers' livelihoods depend.

The housekeepers' decision to perceive Susan as a girl rather than a guest signals that they have agency despite lacking substantial power. This agency, anthropologist Sherry Ortner explains, cannot solely be expressed by overthrowing hierarchies – such as those between hotel housekeepers, guests, and managers – but also by refusing to internalize them. Put differently,

¹⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and postcolonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, 66-111 (New York: Routledge, 1993), 93-103.

¹¹ Rosalind C. Morris, *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 2.

¹² Kahakauwila, *This Is Paradise*, 12-13.

Ortner explains, agency is not only acquired by seizing substantial (e.g., financial, political, or physical) power, but also by refusing to internalize the values and adhere to the norms that are imposed by others.¹³ This refusal to be constrained by one's gender, race, or social status can be done in silence, since it only requires a refusal to identify with one's place within a hierarchy. Because the story is written from the housekeepers' point of view, we can perceive their silent agency relatively easily (compared to the agency of women leaving scant traces in colonial records). Our need to observe the women's convictions and desires by occupying a space in their minds, however, reveals that the housekeepers are subaltern subjects in the world of the story. Contrary to the readers, the story's characters cannot hear these women speak. Foreshadowing that Susan would end up dead, the housekeepers state: "We want to tell her to wear a thicker skirt, but it's not our place to speak to guests." They explain that a colleague once reported to her manager that she "saw a man pressing a woman against a wall and reaching up her skirt," only to be told "not to involve [herself] with [the] guests' lives."¹⁴ This anecdote demonstrates that the women's positions as domestic workers discourage them from speaking out and protecting more privileged women. Put differently, it reveals that the housekeepers are silenced by their lower-class status, precluding hotel guests such as Susan from hearing the wisdom concealed by empty 'Alohas'.

Although the story thus emphasizes that the Micronesian housekeepers are hesitant to speak, it also suggests that Susan would not have listened to them if they had warned her. Blind to the dangers of "paradise", which she repeatedly uses to refer to Hawai'i, Susan shrugs off the warnings she receives from a group of Hawai'ian women she meets at a bar. These women recognize that the white American guy, who "dances with the stiffness of a military man," is potentially dangerous to Susan. Annoyed at Susan's ignorance about life in Hawai'i, they discuss whether they should warn her or "let her find out by herself." Eventually, one of them approaches Susan, saying: "Hey, Sista, not my place, but Da guy you wit' has prison tats." Susan, however, does not heed her warning. Instead, she echoes her complaints about Hawai'ians being "all pissed off" despite living in 'paradise', responding: "You girls really don't want visitors to have a good time, do you?" before walking past the one woman willing and able to warn her.¹⁵

¹³ Sherry Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power and the Acting Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 139. Ortner explains that "projects" – i.e., any voluntary action and any decision one makes regarding one's self-identity – are expressions of agency that can be exercised by those who lack 'agency in the form of (substantial) power.

¹⁴ Kahakauwila, *This Is Paradise*, 12-13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23, 28.

Largeaud-Ortega argues that Susan can be interpreted as a subaltern by virtue of her being ‘thinly-sketched’ and ‘sexualized’ like the *hula* dancers in adventure novels written by men. It is also possible, however, to identify her as a neocolonialist woman unable to hear the subaltern women’s warnings. She is voiceless because we observe her through other women’s eyes. Consequently, we are unable to uncover her desires, ideals, and background. From the perspective of the protagonists, however, she is a neocolonialist Other invading what used to be paradise. Offended by Susan’s remarks about Hawai’i being ‘paradise’, the local women at the bar distance themselves from her. They explain: “Not only does paradise no longer belong to us, but we have to watch foreigners destroy it. We have plenty aloha for someone who appreciates. We have none for a girl like this [*sic*].”¹⁶ The fact that Susan ends up murdered and presumably raped on the beach indicates that she should have listened to the women who recognize the threat of gendered violence because they face it themselves.

The murder’s aftermath sheds light upon the implications of Susan’s inability to align based on gender rather than class or race. The evening after the Micronesian housekeepers find Susan’s body, a third group of protagonists discusses the events leading to her death. These local women blame Susan’s brother for her fate because he left her alone with her prospective murderer. Upon hearing that he returned to the hotel alone that evening, one woman suggests that he must have felt like he was helping her out. The others quickly reply: “What was he thinking?” and: “He wasn’t.”¹⁷ Through their conversation, the novel conveys that Susan’s trust in her brother, the white man closest to her, contributes to her death. Whereas all the Pacific Islander women in the story recognize the danger of leaving Susan alone with her prospective murderer, her brother puts her at risk by returning to the hotel without her, unaware of the dangers facing women in ‘paradise’.

The brother’s inability to recognize the threat to his sister signals that Susan should have listened to the ‘pissed off’ Hawai’ian women instead. Put differently, it indicates that the mainland American Susan is more similar to Pacific Islander women than she thinks she is. Rather than being above the concerns of those inhabiting ‘paradise’, she faces these dangers too. As Spivak explained, the subaltern category is hierarchically layered: one’s place within it depends upon one’s ability to approximate an ideal.¹⁸ Those who embody the ideal of a certain time and place are more likely to speak in the records and thus further removed from having a subaltern status. Writer and philosopher Sylvia Wynter has identified the present-day global

¹⁶ Kahakauwila, *This Is Paradise*, 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁸ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern speak?” 79-80.

ideal as one that is embodied and represented by white, upper-class, Euro-American men.¹⁹ If white men define what it means to exist outside of the subaltern category, Susan falls within it, leaving her brother ill-equipped to understand and represent her interests.

The Pacific Islander women in ‘This Is Paradise’ understand this and perceive Susan as one of them – i.e., as someone who might suffer the consequences of her subaltern status. Because these women are not only female but also lower-class and non-white, they are further removed from the present-day global ideal than Susan is. Accordingly, Susan has difficulty noticing and internalizing their warnings: whereas the Micronesian housekeepers are hesitant to speak, the Hawai’ian women are misunderstood. Susan leaves these women behind to enjoy the rest of her evening with two white American men: her brother and her prospective murderer. As her death eradicates her voice, it renders her the ultimate subaltern subject, whose motivations we can only gauge through the speculations of onlookers. By choosing to silence Susan by means of gendered violence at the hands of a white man, the story underscores that Susan should have identified with those with whom she shared the disadvantage of gender, rather than with those with whom she shared the advantage of class and race. Hence, like the Pacific Islander poets who called attention to the gendered violence perpetrated by representatives of the decolonizing world, ‘This Is Paradise’ conveys the need for a female solidarity that surpasses colonial legacies, driving home that no woman is immune to the gendered violence pervading the neocolonial space of tourist destinations such as Hawai’i.

Conclusion

This essay has examined the extent to which the characters in Kristiana Kahakauwila’s short story ‘This Is Paradise’ can be interpreted as subaltern subjects. Whereas the Micronesian and Indigenous Hawai’ian women are subalterns in the world of the story, Susan has a subaltern status from the perspective of the reader, because we read her story through other women’s eyes. More importantly, Susan is a fellow subaltern from the perspective of the Micronesian and Hawai’ian protagonists. To them, Susan is a prospective victim of gendered violence. Her inability to perceive herself as part of the subaltern class leads to her death. Therefore, ‘This Is Paradise’ can be interpreted as a cautionary tale addressing white women who believe themselves to be immune to the gendered violence pervading the neocolonial space of high-end

¹⁹ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 263-270, 314-318.

tourism. It appeals to them to align with lower-class and non-white women with whom they have more in common than they think because all women can be reduced to objects for male consumption.

As it encourages female readers to identify with Pacific Islander women whose concerns they should share, 'This Is Paradise' fits within a larger body of Pacific Islander literature that sets out to emphasize the commonalities between women from disparate backgrounds. From the perspective of the local women in the story, mainland American women such as Susan are responsible for their loss of land. As long as these women vote with their wallets, they can perpetuate or disrupt the hold that tourism, militarism, and industrialism have on paradisiacal destinations. 'This Is Paradise' conveys this perspective through the anger expressed by the local women warning Susan against her prospective murderer. By repeatedly highlighting that Susan could have been saved by the advice of women who she fails to take seriously, however, the story places its emphasis on white women's potential to be victimized by the danger lurking behind the paradisiacal façade of luxury resorts. It urges these women to forge alliances based on gender rather than socio-economic status, nationality, or race, as Susan's financial and political power are useless in the face of the antagonist's preparedness to resort to violence.

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