

In the Shadow of the Beast



Images by John Hook

“Everywhere you look in Hawai‘i, you see the military. Yet in daily life relatively few people in Hawai‘i actually see the military at all. It is hidden in plain sight.”—Kathy E. Ferguson and Phyllis Turnbull, Oh, Say, Can You See? The Semiotics of the Military in Hawai‘i

The military in Hawai‘i is so ever-present and familiar that, for the most part, we no longer see it carved into the landscape and folded into our social fabric. Yet the military controls about 231,000 acres, or 5.6 percent of total land area in the state, occupying a staggering 24.6 percent of O‘ahu. Military personnel, retirees, and their dependents constitute roughly 17 percent of the population, and the military is one of our largest industries, second only to tourism. Talking about the military in Hawai‘i means talking about our

economy, our patriotism, and often, our friends and family. But it also means talking about dependence, violence, imperialism, and occupation.

Longtime local activists Kyle Kajihiro and Terri Keko‘olani are working to push these uncomfortable topics into popular discourse and propel a more critical discussion of militarization through their work with Hawai‘i Peace and Justice and DMZ-Hawai‘i/Aloha ‘Āina. (DMZ is derived from the acronym for “demilitarized zone.”) On a breezy December morning, they take me on what they call a “DeTour,” visiting several sites of militarization around O‘ahu and making visible the military’s heavy footprints upon our historical, social, and geographical landscape.

From the beginning of the tour, Kajihiro, whose unassuming smile is well recognized among the activist community, proudly traces the genealogy of their work back to the people’s struggles on Kaho‘olawe and in Kalama, and Waiāhole-Waikane in the 1970s. Keko‘olani, affectionately called “Auntie Terri” by many, was a member of the fifth landing on Kaho‘olawe—she acted alongside other kanaka maoli (Native Hawaiian) activists in direct defiance of the U.S. military. “The whole idea of a beautiful island like Kaho‘olawe devastated by bombing over almost 50 years,” she says, “brought me into this whole thing of, ‘Why does the military have this power and the ability to destroy islands?’”

The Scene of the Crime

The first stop on our tour is ‘Iolani Palace, standing stoically amidst the morning rush in Downtown Honolulu. “We come to the ‘Iolani Palace to talk about this as the symbolic heart of Hawai‘i’s sovereignty, and also as the scene of the crime, where the overthrow took place,” says Kajihiro.

On the lawn, under the shade of a towering tree, Kajihiro points to the building’s western facade, telling how King David Kalākaua built the extravagant palace, complete with electricity, to demonstrate that the

kingdom was a modern, civilized nation in an age when imperialism was devouring much of the world. He recounts the unfortunate course of political events that led to the overthrow: the Reciprocity Treaty of 1875, which allowed sugar to flow tariff-free to the United States and cemented Hawai'i's ties to the United States; the Bayonet Constitution, which increased the power of the white minority while disenfranchising Asian immigrants and poor Native Hawaiians; the second Treaty of Reciprocity, which granted the United States exclusive use of Pearl Harbor; and finally, the coup d'état that stole Lili'uokalani's crown, imprisoned her within the palace walls, and began an illegal occupation that continues today.

Kajihiro points toward Mililani Street, where troops from the USS Boston marched to from Honolulu Harbor and aimed Gatling guns at the palace, providing the muscle for the overthrow. "That was the beginning of the broken relationship between the U.S. and Hawai'i," says Kajihiro. "Now there was a military act that violated Hawai'i's sovereignty in order to support a regime change."

Before we leave, Keko'olani flips through a binder she brought with her. In it, there is a photo of her great-great-grandfather Charles Peleohalani Keko'olani and his signature, among thousands of others, scrawled onto an 1897 petition against the annexation of the Hawaiian Kingdom. When talk of annexation spread across the islands after the overthrow, the people of Hawai'i launched a petition, gathering over 38,000 signatures, accounting for 90 percent of Hawaiian nationals. The Kū'e Petition was hand-delivered to Washington D.C. and succeeded in blocking Senate ratification of the pending Treaty of Annexation between the United States and the provisional government. "The people, and my own ancestors, were successful with the Kū'e," says Keko'olani. Of course, success was short-lived. Without any kind of formal agreement to prevent annexation, the islands were seized in a unilateral—and thus illegal—decision by the United States. Over the course of a century of Americanization and assimilation, the memory of the petition and the people's resistance was forgotten—until University of Hawai'i professors

Noenoe Silva and Nalani Minton brought copies back to O‘ahu in 1998.

As we pass a Japanese tour group snapping photos of the palace, Kajihiro adds, “This is the big lie we’ve been told growing up in Hawai‘i; that Hawai‘i willingly became a part of the United States. It all hinged on a military action.” Looking back towards the palace, he adds, “Those guns that landed in 1893 have only morphed into all the warships and drones and bases, everything else that we have in Hawai‘i today.”



The He‘e of U.S. Imperialism

Our tour continues up Halawa Heights to a large but rather inconspicuous building perched along the ridge behind a barbed wire fence: the headquarters of the United States Pacific Command, the oldest and largest of the unified military commands projecting U.S. power and interests over the Pacific. Senator Inouye, champion of Hawai‘i’s military economy, appropriated 90 million for the high-tech building, which oversees a region encompassing 36 countries, half the world’s population, and one-third of U.S.

trade. From here, we can see Pearl Harbor in its entirety, fingers of water running across a wide, flat plain.

“Kalekoa Kaeo [a Hawaiian Studies professor and activist] likens the military to a giant he‘e (octopus). The PACOM headquarters are its brain, its nervous system,” says Kajihiro as Keko‘olani holds up a map of the PACOM region. “The NSA station in Wahiawa is one of its many eyes.” Its tentacles stretch far beyond the harbor below us, farther than Schofield Barracks in the distance or Mākua Valley on the other side of the Wai‘anae Range. PACOM’s tentacles reach out to Pōhakuloa Training Area on Hawai‘i Island. They are wrapped firmly around Guam, where the U.S. military controls one-third of the territory, and extend to Okinawa, where massive protests have been held in opposition to the U.S. military presence. They penetrate New Zealand-Aotearoa, where peace activists used a sickle to puncture a large, white golf ball radar station, like the one sitting in Pearl Harbor. They entangle the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Philippines, South Korea, and hundreds of other locations. All of these places benefit economically from the U.S. military presence, ‘ng list of grievances as well including environmental contamination, land struggle, violence and crime around military bases, and economic dependency.

“Small places become important for projecting power,” says Kajihiro. “They are easy to maintain and dominate without the friction of resistance.” And the military does indeed dominate here in Hawai‘i, where it is nearly impossible to imagine an economy void of the billions of federal dollars brought here by defense spending. As America’s gateway to Asia and the Pacific, Hawai‘i projects and protects U.S. power and interests across the globe, tying those diverse struggles intrinsically to our islands.

The Belly of the Beast

At Pearl Harbor, the quiet, formal air of PACOM is replaced by a chattering rush of aloha shirt-clad tourists. “At one point we decided that at the heart of the issue is Pu‘uloa, Pearl Harbor,” says Kajihiro, “and that we had to unlock

that story and sort of explain how it has a grip on Hawai‘i and our imagination about this place.” As we walk along the manicured waterfront path, Keko‘olani, whose grandfather received a purple heart as a firefighter on the day of the attack, says softly, “When we come here, we always remember and respect the people who lost their lives on December 7. We don’t come here to disturb their stories but to remember that all of Hawai‘i suffered that day and to imagine a future where this can be a memorial for peace rather than war.”

We pause at a bronze model of O‘ahu placed at the center of an elegant stone circle that subtly echoes our voices. Kajihiro and Keko‘olani call Pearl Harbor by its oft-forgotten name, Ke Awalao o‘ Pu‘uloa, or “the many waters of the long hill.” The syllables reverberate as we repeat them together with a few curious tourists. Not long ago, Ke Awalao o‘ Pu‘uloa was the breadbasket of O‘ahu, a fertile estuary supporting as many as 36 fishponds. We run our fingers over the model of O‘ahu, feeling the dips and valleys of the watershed that runs into the harbor. At its most productive time, Keko‘olani tells me, “the fishponds of Pu‘uloa made the land momona (fat) and brought a time of peace to O‘ahu.” Since nearly the beginning of the United States’ relationship with Hawai‘i, however, Pu‘uloa was eyed as a valuable military asset. The drive to expand U.S. naval power across the Pacific through the exclusive use of Pu‘uloa was met with deep resistance from Hawai‘i’s people and was among the factors that led American interests to force Kalākaua to sign the Bayonet Constitution under the threat of violence, thereby setting the stage for the overthrow.

Today, Pearl Harbor is toxic, a Superfund site with more than 700 individual contaminated sites (though you can still find some impoverished families fishing its waters beneath signs warning of contamination). “We don’t even think about the days when Pu‘uloa provided food for us, but imagine if it could still do the same today,” says Keko‘olani. This legacy of enclosure and abuse of the ‘āina is perhaps one of the most contested and challenged aspects of the military in Hawai‘i. Resistance movements have fought military

expansion on Kaho‘olawe, where 50 years of bombing have made 90 percent of the island inaccessible; in Mākua, which remains littered with unexploded ordinances; in Pōhakuloa on Hawai‘i Island, a live-fire training area saddled between Mauna Kea, Mauna Loa, and Hualalai; and in Waikane, where residents waged a battle against proposed jungle warfare training in 2003.

Finally, we reach the building that houses the recently revamped museum exhibit. Wartime music plays on surround sound, punctuated by sounds of gunfire and explosions. We walk past interactive video displays, photographs, and countless replicas of weaponry. The exhibit originally told a largely Navy narrative of sneak attack and eventual triumph, but when the museum was redone in 2010, it conveyed a more inclusive narrative accounting for the perspective of local people who shared in the trauma of that infamous day and addressed the American bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. “Still,” says Kajihiro, “certain perspectives are privileged, while others are marginalized.” A new section was added to tell the Native Hawaiian story. When we walked past the displays, they were physically blocked by people seated on benches immediately in front of the placards, a reminder that those most heavily affected by the military are still largely ignored by it.

The Future: Ku‘e and Kukulu

In Waiawa, behind Leeward Community College, just a few steps from the waters of Pu‘uloa, we find a dirt road driveway marked by a faded Hawaiian flag waving in the warm breeze. At the end of the driveway are the beginnings of a small farming venture: a row of young coconut trees, some vegetables, a few chickens, papaya trees, an emerging lo‘i kalo, and an ahu (stone alter or shrine) nestled in one corner of the property. Every demilitarization tour ends here, at Hanakehau Learning Farm, where Native Hawaiian activist Andre Perez is working the land and seeking to provide a place of community and action for his people and lāhui (nation). “The purpose of ending here at the farm is to juxtapose the negative-impact experience of the tour with hope for the future,” says Perez, “and to show that despite heavily militarization,

there are kīpuka (variation or change of form, as an opening in a forest) of change for reclaiming and restoring of the Hawaiian lands.”

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Perez’s story is important to the narrative that DMZ-Hawai‘i/Aloha ‘Āina strives to tell, because his life, like many other Hawaiian men, at one point included military service. After graduating from high school, Perez was accepted to University of Hawai‘i at Hilo but couldn’t afford to attend. The military offered a way off the island and a path toward financial security, so Perez enlisted and served eight years. “I wasn’t aware of U.S. imperialism, capitalist agendas. I just did my job. I hung out with a hardcore group of Hawaiian guys and local braddahs. The biggest motivator in the military is the loyalty and camaraderie with your buddies.” Roughly 54 percent of the military-controlled land in the state rests on the crown lands of the Hawaiian nation, and Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders are dramatically overrepresented in the United States military. “We’re at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder—it funnels us into the military,” says Perez, who worked on counter-recruitment efforts with Kajihiro in local high schools.

Upon his discharge from the military, Perez spent three months on the beach in Wai‘anae. That time was really significant for me,” says Perez. “I saw real struggle and survival amongst Hawaiians. Entire families are living on the beaches in tents and shanties, houseless in their own homeland while military personnel get free housing on our land. Military personnel living off-base also drive up the rent for local people. Oftentimes, owners would rather rent to military personnel because they can pay more.” In Wai‘anae, living out of his truck, he says, “I went through a pretty quick decolonization process. I started to see the contradictions.” In 1998, he applied for a job as a live-in caretaker on Kaho‘olawe, and spent the next seven years rehabilitating the land from a half-century of military bombing.

On Kaho‘olawe, Perez worked on native-plant resotation and met key leaders within the Hawaiian community. “Through my connections on Kaho‘olawe I got to meet my mentors. It threw me right into this mix of cultural practitioners and activists. I got to know all of them.” Among them were activists like Skippy Ioane and Palikapu Dedman, who, like him, had served in the military before becoming leaders within the Hawaiian community. “A conscious vet is a powerful activist,” says Perez. “If you want to experience elements of American racism, you can find it right in the military. A good part of the military is poor, disenfranchised people of color. It’s a way to provide for their family and contribute to society, but it’s not hard for them, and for us, to see the contradictions.”

When Perez finally decided to leave Kaho‘olawe and return to O‘ahu, he became active in the movement for Hawaiian sovereignty. “Kaho‘olawe was a springboard that taught me that there was more,” he says. “If you’re gonna talk about militarism and demilitarism you cannot talk about it without talking about sovereignty and the occupation.” As he looks out upon his three-acre plot, Perez talks about the balance he has struck between kū‘e, meaning “to oppose or resist,” and kukulu, meaning “to build.” “I strategically fight and protest against things like militarization, but now I realize that it’s equally important to fight for things, to build and create things that are meaningful, long-lasting forms of power.” Hanakehau Learning Farm represents, perhaps, an image of what awaits us on the other side of demilitarization. Alongside potted kalo awaiting a home in the lo‘i still being dug out of the earth, his kids’ trampoline stands in the red dirt. “If I create somewhere like this, I create a space we control,” he says, “a little kīpuka of Hawaiian critical consciousness that is in the shadow of militarization, in the belly of the beast, but serves as a beacon of hope for the future.”