UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Review of Settler Militarism

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/974595vs

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 16(2)

Author

Whitenack, Mariko

Publication Date

2025-11-22

DOI

10.5070/T8.53241

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Book Review

Settler Militarism: World War II in Hawai'i and the Making of US Empire, by Juliet Nebolon
Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024
161pp., $27.95 USD
ISBN 978-1-4780-3101-7

Reviewed by MARIKO WHITENACK, New York University
mcw536@nyu.edu

Under the brightly burning sun at West Loch—adjacent to Pu'uloa (the lagoon on O'ahu now known as Pearl Harbor)—a small but mighty group of community members harvest densely growing mangrove trees near Kapapapuhi Point Park. These nonnative mangroves will be used to build a hale (house) for a community organization in Wai'anae, while removing them clears space where there were once flourishing fishponds, working toward the restoration of Kanaka Maoli lifeways in more ways than one. West Loch appears briefly in Juliet Nebolon's *Settler Militarism: World War II in Hawai'i and the Making of US Empire;* with a close attention to detail that is characteristic of the book, Nebolon analyzes a court case in which the power of eminent domain was used to carry out land seizures. That US military occupation of those seized lands has adversely affected Pu'uloa is as clear as the water is murky; the sunken warship *USS Arizona* continues to leak toxic oil more than eighty years after its bombing. I was surprised, then, to hear a friend question the desire for the removal of the US military: *They have done terrible things, but what if they leave and we are immediately occupied by someone else?* Conversation shifted away as we continued felling mangroves, but I was left with the tension of this genuine hesitancy to reject US militarism from someone so dedicated to the resurgence of Indigenous cultural practices. Where was this coming from?

Juliet Nebolon's *Settler Militarism: World War II in Hawai'i and the Making of US Empire* reveals how militarization came to permeate everyday life in Hawai'i, bolstering settler colonialism in ways that linger even generations after World War II. Nebolon fleshes out how settler military governance structured state approaches to producing and managing differentiated racialized populations, joining a growing body of relational analyses of settler colonialism from scholars such as Haunani-Kay Trask, Dean Saranillio, and Juliana Hu Pegues. Challenging dominant narratives of World War II in Hawai'i which describe the violences of martial law as "necessary aberrations" (6) to protect liberal democracy, Nebolon contextualizes US settler military governance as

part of the ongoing colonial occupation of Hawai'i and the exploitation of racialized laboring bodies. By focusing on the martial law period (1941–1944) in which Hawai'i was doubly positioned as both "home front" and "war front," Nebolon reveals settler colonialism and militarization as interdependent formations, mutually invested in accumulating land by dispossessing Indigenous peoples, that in different moments worked together and at odds to one another (6). In addition to those invested in relational racialization and Hawai'i's history, this book will appeal to readers interested in racial liberalism, biopolitical governance, and the relationship between capitalism and militarism.

The book opens with a close reading of two wartime photographs—one of female high school student Susan Kang receiving a typhoid vaccination from a US Army captain, the other of four smiling women defense laborers moving pallets—which illustrate elements of what Nebolon calls the "social reproduction of US settler militarism" (2). Through these photographs, Nebolon shows us the seeming paradox of settler militarism: due to wartime capitalist dependence on racialized life and labor, colonial and military governance simultaneously sought to incorporate and purportedly "improve" land and people (through programs such as mandatory vaccination), even as they dispossessed and depleted those lives (2). Nebolon uses the term "racial liberal biopolitics" to refer to this dynamic of racially differentiated population management (11). Across five chapters, Nebolon examines how settler militarism operated through biopolitical regimes of eminent domain, public health, domestic nutrition programs, public education, and incarceration camps.

In the first and fifth chapters, Nebolon shows that settler militarism enabled land theft through the seizure of land in Hawai'i through eminent domain and the creation of US internment and prisoner-of-war camps throughout the Pacific. Drawing on government documents, court cases, and newspaper articles, Chapter 1, "National Defense is Based on Land," analyzes the colonial logic of improvement articulated by property owners seeking to justify the value of their land at which they should be compensated by the federal government. For example, Nebolon examines Civil Case 466, involving land at West Loch on O'ahu, in which the Ewa Plantation Company successfully argued it should be compensated for the loss of projected *future* profits on sugar and molasses production (33). In Chapter 5, "Settler Military Camps," Nebolon elaborates on how the logic of improvement was likewise used to justify US imperial expansion to the Northern Mariana Islands and the Marshall Islands, as internment camps there for Marshallese, Chamorros, and Carolinians (in addition to those for Japanese soldiers and Korean and Okinawan civilians) were portrayed as modernization projects that would improve the lives of "peaceful yet primitive peoples" (142). This chapter provides a corrective to dominant narratives of Japanese American incarceration during World War II as only taking place in the continental US. Nebolon demonstrates that when we understand this network of camps relationally, we see that wartime racialized incarceration relied on different spaces being constructed as "free" and "unfree" in relation to one another (149). Settler militarism operated through both

the dispossession and purported improvement of land, and the biopolitical management of people—the focus of the intervening chapters.

In Chapters 2 through 4, Nebolon examines how martial law policies affecting areas of civilian life, including public health and public education, managed Hawai'i's racially diverse population according to logics of race, gender, and indigeneity (10). Building on the work of Indigenous Studies scholars such as Aileen Moreton-Robinson and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, Nebolon shows that many of these strategies treated Hawaiians as a racial group, eliding Indigenous claims to land and sovereignty. Mandatory vaccination programs sought to "maintain Hawai'i as an uncontaminated military outpost and produce able 'Americanized' laboring bodies that could contribute to the US defense industry" (50). The Honolulu Blood Bank, considered part of that defense mechanism, reported the "racial extraction" of its donors in ways that naturalized donating blood as an inherently patriotic part of assimilating to the "American way of life" (67). The US military's interest in public health extended into the space of the home through a focus on nutrition. The logic of "settler military domesticity" aimed to cultivate the strength of "future citizens and soldiers," ironically promoting the use of local produce—often Asian or Hawaiian staple crops—as substitutes in American recipes while marginalizing immigrant diets (101). School programs like the "Speak American" campaign built on earlier efforts to ban the Hawaiian language in schools. Continuing the turn in critical militarization studies away from a narrow focus on battles and bases to interrogating militarism's less obvious quotidian influences, following foundational works like Teresia Teaiwa's "bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans," Nebolon demonstrates how settler militarism permeated everyday life in ways that continue to reverberate.[1]

Throughout the book, Nebolon is quick to remind readers that settler militarism "was never inevitable, is always unfinished, and is fundamentally reactive … to Native life and claims to sovereignty" (6). In a move that resonates with much of the current work in American Studies, Nebolon insists that projects of domination are not all-encompassing, to remind ourselves of the existence of what was, what is, what can still be otherwise. However, it is Nebolon's detailed excavation of some of the mechanisms through which settler militarism has influenced everyday life that leads to what I found particularly generative about this book: how it helps us think through settler militarism's persistent mutating presence, even in spaces of Indigenous resurgence. How might we learn from Nebolon's approach to identify what settler militarism looks like in this particular historical moment? And how might we organize against its logics towards, as Nebolon urges us, "ongoing work that collectively envisions and moves toward their undoing" (161)?

Notes

[1] Teresia K. Teaiwa, "bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 87–109, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23701591

Selected Bibliography

Teaiwa, Teresia K. "bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans." *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 87–109. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23701591