

MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

Hawai'i One Summer



Maxine Hong Kingston

Hawai'i
One Summer

A Latitude 20 Book

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Hawai'i One Summer



Lone tree along the coast.
Lānaʻi, Hawaiʻi.

to the friends who are in this book

Preface to the Paperback Edition

I wrote these essays during the middle of our seventeen-year stay in Hawai‘i. Reading them today, I see that I have changed, and Hawai‘i has changed. I am happier, and Hawai‘i is more wonderful. A black cloud had covered my home place, Northern California. But leaving the Mainland for Hawai‘i had not gotten us out from under it. The black pall that spread over the world during the long war had still not lifted. In 1978, the year of the Summer of this book, I was continuing my depression from the Vietnam War. The fallout from that war went on and on—wars in Cambodia and Laos, MIAs, agent orange, boat people.

A reader of this book surprises me. She asks, Why the many allusions to suicide? I reread these pages, and see: *Mortgage* meant *death*. The bombing of Kaho‘olawe—by ANZUS and Japan. My son haunted by the ghosts of Mānoa, and I haunted by the ghost of a lost poet. Nature’s creatures suffering and killing. Kālua pig looking like a haole human being. And homesickness—but if I do not feel at home in Paradise, where is home? My first take on Hawai‘i was, Here I am arrived at the Land of Lotus Eaters, and I’m not going to leave. I thought I was writing light-hearted essays.

This same sympathetic reader wondered, Could it be that you’d broken taboos by writing and publishing secrets? Well, it did not feel good to be a writer in a place that is not a writing culture, where written language is only a few hundred years old. The literary community in Hawai‘i argues over who owns the myths and stories, whether the local language and writings should

be exported to the Mainland, whether or not so-and-so is authentic, is Hawaiian. For me, Hawai‘i was a good place for writing about California and China, and not for writing about Hawai‘i. I felt the kapu—these are not your stories to write; these myths are not your myths; the Hawaiians are not your people. You are haole. You are katonk. My great grandfathers, one on my mother’s side, one on my father’s side, and my paternal grandfather lived and worked in Hawai‘i. Even so, they were not kama‘āina, and I am not kama‘āina.

Once, on the Big Island, Pele struck me blind. She didn’t want me to look at her, nor to write about her. I could hear her say, “So you call yourself Woman Warrior, do you? Take that.” I feel fear even now as I write her name. And I could hear the Hawaiians: “You have taken our land. Don’t take our stories.”

Hawai‘i held an Asian Pacific American writers’ conference the very Summer of this book. We addressed one another with rancor and panic, though some did try for aloha. The name *Asian Pacific American* had barely been thought, and many people denied every term in it. We were divided between those who would give the stories, myths, ceremonies to whoever hears them, and those who would have possession be by blood. So, I decided that I would write personally, about myself and my family, about homesickness for California, and my upcoming high school reunion, about washing the dishes, teaching school, reading. I would publish these humble pieces in New York, and bypass Hawai‘i. I meant to honor kapu, not touch kapu things at all.

But though I did try to leave her out, Hawai‘i—people sing her and speak of her as Spirit—made her way into these essays. Writing about buying our first house, I worried that I was trying to own property that had been a Royal Hawaiian Land Grant. Describing Nature, the sea, the air, the lands and fish, is describing Hawai‘i. I studied Lew Welch on dialect because I was thinking about Hawai‘i’s language—how to teach standard English to students who speak pidgin without offending or harming them?

Now, a dozen years after leaving her, I realize a way free to tell a story of Hawai‘i.

In 1980, I was recognized as a Living Treasure of Hawai‘i. The enrobed monks and priests of the Honpa Hongwanji Mission at the temple on the Pali chanted Sanskrit, and passed a certificate through the incense that entitles me to “all the rights, privileges, and consideration” of a Living Treasure of Hawai‘i. Some of my fellow Living Treasures are Mary Kawena Pukui, Gabby Pahinui, Herb Kawainui Kane, Francis Haar, Bumpei Akaji, Satoru Abe, Auntie Irmgard Farden Aluli, Don Mitchell, Auntie Emma Farden Sharp, Tadashi Sato, Eddie Kamai, and everybody, really, only not yet formally recognized in ceremony.

As a responsible Living Treasure, I feel called upon to tell you a story that will give help and power. Once there was a prophecy that Kamehameha would conquer all the islands if he could build a great temple to his family war god, Kū-kā‘ili-moku. Setting some of the lava rocks and boulders with his own hands,

Kamehameha built the heiau on Pu‘ukoholā, the Hill of the Whale, at Kawaihae. His domain at that time was the northwest half of the Big Island. Before the heiau could be finished, the chiefs of Maui, Lāna‘i, Moloka‘i, Kaua‘i, and O‘ahu raised an armada and attacked Kamehameha’s land and people. Kamehameha repelled the attack, and completed the building of the massive temple. To dedicate it, he summoned his cousin, Keoua Kū‘ahu‘ula, ruler of the rest of the Big Island, to come to the ceremony. It was understood that Keoua Kū‘ahu‘ula would be the gift to the war god. In honor, he could not refuse this call, but he emasculated himself; Kamehameha would not have a perfect male sacrifice. Kamehameha waiting on shore, Keoua Kū‘ahu‘ula arose in his canoe. Kamehameha’s counselor and father-in-law, Ke‘eaumoku, killed him. Keoua’s blood and body sanctified the new temple. Enmity between their two clans lasted for two hundred years.

In 1991, descendants of Kamehameha and descendants of Keoua Kū‘ahu‘ula had an inspiration “to heal the bitterness, grievances, and enmity of the past two hundred years.” The families gathered at Pu‘ukoholā Heiau, and re-created the event of long ago: Keoua Kū‘ahu‘ula approaches Kamehameha. This time, they meet and walk on together.

To Kamehameha I, unification meant conquering all the Hawaiian people by war. Now unification is the coming together of former enemies in peace. It is possible to heal history. It is possible to be one people living in harmony.

I heard the above story from Jim Houston, who heard it from the Park Service and from Kalani Meinecke, who narrated the unification ceremony at Pu'ukoholā Heiau.

I am not the person I was in the “War” essay, and the “Dish-washing” essay. Now looking back at Sanctuary at the Church of the Crossroads, I remember the AWOL soldiers who were true pacifist heroes. And the black cloud no longer hangs over Hawai‘i. I am more joyful and hopeful than when I was young. And I love washing dishes, which attitude is the answer to *that* koan.

Ke aloha nō! Aloha!

Mainland, 1998

P.S. I must tell you about the incarnations of the pieces in this book. Most of them first appeared in my “Hers” column in the *New York Times*, which rejected “Lew Welch: An Appreciation.” I thought: New York is too provincial to understand the Pacific Rim. But now I see that I didn’t follow Lew Welch’s disappearance far enough. He got off at *leina-a-ka-‘uhane*, leaping place of souls. I owe this poetic insight to Victoria Nelson of *My Time in Hawaii*; our times coincided.

Leigh McLellan of Meadow Press gathered these pieces, and made a book of them with her own loving hands. She chose paper from the Kozo rice fields in Korea, hand-set the type, made the paste paper for the cover, and sewed the binding. The Taoist teacher, Deng Ming-Dao, son of Jade Snow Wong, cut and

printed four beautiful six-color woodblock pictures. There are 150 books, half of them in clipcases that Leigh constructed. It is a luxury to hold and touch and smell one of these books. But, at \$400 per book and \$500 for the slipcased one, the fine print edition of *Hawai'i One Summer* is for art collectors, and not for readers.

So, these writings, once ephemeral newspaper articles, then revered artifacts, have found their just-right form—the paperback in your hand.

Preface

Twenty years after an adventure, I can write about it truly. A few large shapes remain in the memory—unforgettable. A thing which at one time seemed monumental becomes background or a surprisingly small figure in front, or it has disappeared. Remember how stereopticon pictures look like popping 3-D with cut-out-like cars and buildings and people artificially forward and backward? Memory is artistic in the ways it arranges and sorts out. My son is exactly twenty years old, and what I remember of his being born was a big hand holding a little foot. I am forty-three years old, and I just noticed that the hero in the novel I'm working on is twenty-three. At last, I understand about being a young person setting out in the world.

I did not wait for twenty years to write the pieces in this book, which is like a diary. There is sometimes only a week or two between an event and my writing about it. I wrote about my son's surfing upon coming home from it. I wrote about the high school reunion before going to it. The result is that I am making up meanings as I go along. Which is the way I live anyway. There is a lot of detailed doubting here.

Since the invitation to the twentieth year high school reunion came at the beginning of the summer, I could have followed up and told you what happened next. But by August my worrying was all taken up by my son's surfing. Also, the reunion was so complicated—the people were so complicated—my seeing the child and the aging adult in others and in myself—that I have to wait until I'm still older to figure it out.

What I like very much about being middle-aged is that I can write from opposing points of view at once—rebel’s and householder’s, student’s and teacher’s, mother’s and child’s.

I was finishing *China Men* in the summer when other people were vacationing. So, for breaks, I wrote these pieces. But I was in the world of *China Men*, and its images kept appearing everywhere—in my letters to friends, in life, and in this book. So, here again are the frigate birds in the air currents, creatures on the beach, assembly lines funneling napalm to Vietnam, the sandalwood that was still here in Hawai‘i when my great-grandfathers came.

It is very difficult to capture Hawai‘i. Whose point of view among all of Hawai‘i’s peoples is the right way of seeing? Her beauty defies artistic imitation. There should be epic poems to her, as there were in ancient times. Failing that, I have instead and incidentally described her piece by piece, and hope that the sum praises her.

As I read over these essays, there is some grammar that I was tempted to clean up. I used to have a habit of saying “like,” as in “like cool, man” and “like wow.” It was my tribute to the slang of my generation. The twenty-three-year-old hero of my novel, which is set in Chinatown and North Beach in 1963, talks like that, and his style is spilling over into mine. Let it stand.

April 1984

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Bed in Agee House.
Mānoa Valley, Honolulu.

