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"All We Know Is The Summit"

"The cultural and geographic tapestry of Hawai'i is woven by stories," poet Laurel Nakanishi writes in the notes section for her poem "The Shark" (85). The sea, the stones, springs, and mountains are said to nourish a bond between land and narrative, a calling for the navigation of deep and interconnected bodies. This is why the *ʻāina,* or living earth, is such a crucial part of Hawaiian storytelling. Why *kanaka-ʻāina* (human-land) connection is revered in the culture and believed to create a balanced, sustained life (Nakanishi 85). Unfortunately in an increasingly Americanized state, Hawaii has suffered under the power of multinational corporations seeking to feed the tourism industry. The "paradise" that visitors and foreigners look forward to is a mask plastered upon the packaged depreciation and exploitation of Hawaiian land, history, and identity. But just as the native Hawaiians believe, the natural world can be a reminder of what was, and what will always be. Laurel Nakanishi was born and raised on the island of O'ahu. Her poetry collection, *Ashore,* encourages readers to embrace the art of perception and perspective, proposing the question "And yet, what do I really know?" (Nakanishi 6). *Ashore* exudes compelling imagery and diction that embodies authentic native Hawaiian culture and urges readers to dive deeper into the relationship between place and story.

Nakanishi strategically emulates a foreign perspective in some of her poems to reflect upon the implications of immigration and tourism in Hawaii and how this dynamic affects the human-land connection natives so deeply uphold. In the poem "Mixed", she speaks on the alienation her Japanese and Hawaiian descent has caused her in various places, from being

judged and mislabeled in Japan and Nicaragua, to being "not-quite-white, but white-enough," as experienced in Montana (23). In response, she writes, "Strangers toss in their turns of phrase, their home food, their festival dancing. And I weave them into my hair—these trinkets and misunderstandings" (Nakanishi 23). The act of weaving these fabrications into her hair procures a somewhat forlorn image that expresses the deep longing to be understood without having to distort or embellish her identity. Hawaiians face this problem incessantly today due to Americanization and perhaps a general lack of knowledge regarding native Hawaiian culture. Nakanishi further explores this perspective in the poem "Mānoa", where in Part I she paints a picture of the paradise tourists envision: "sun and sand, coconut, surfs-up, luau, grassskirt…" (61). The imagery articulated here captures "a collective longing for a tropical vacation," and with it a fundamental disregard for the authentic language and values of the people who call the islands home (Nakanishi 64). In essence, Nakanishi utilizes touching modes of imagery that are dependent upon perspective, gracefully allowing readers to both embrace an external role while also becoming more familiar with the true native way of life.

In addition, *Ashore* juxtaposes this foreign perspective with the personification of the Hawaiian islands, land, and sea to emphasize the cherished relationship natives share with the natural world around them, offering a viewpoint that better represents this group of people. Some recognize the ocean as an all-powerful entity, yet the poem "Homecoming" invokes a deeper dive into how humans interact with the environment, and also how nature interacts with man: "When the city is tinged with orange, the ocean holds the sun like a boat sinking into its own brilliant reflection. I tell my students: *First there is longing, then a bridge*" (Nakanishi 53). The native Hawaiian perception of nature is regarded with reverence and comfort. Nakanishi's personification establishes that even a body as powerful as the ocean can be tender and caring,

much like how a person of power can use their status for both good and bad. Furthermore, the addition of "longing, then a bridge" iterates mankind's profound nature of greed and desire, and how one only need look to the natural world for answers, and they will come—a bridge supported by the knowledge of the world. This relationship with nature is further examined in Part II of "Mānoa" when Nakanishi writes about the word "aloha", which is a vital aspect of Hawaiian values that has also been packaged for consumption by tourists. "You have aloha for all things, for everything around you… A deep and genuine reverence for life—living and becoming a part of everything around you" (Nakanishi 61). While visitors understand the word to be warm and welcoming, the authentic term is a recognition of the divine and shouldn't be used casually. That being said, *Ashore* calls out these false understandings by utilizing personification and imagery that illuminates the more introspective and spiritual relationship natives share with their home.

The very first poem of Nakanishi's collection is called "Invoking The Bodhisattvas' Names In Honolulu". Within the Buddhist practice, Bodhisattvas are beings who have delayed Buddhahood to remain on earth and help all living beings. By calling upon Bodhisattvas, Hawaiians invoke help and guidance from the divine. Nakanishi's choice of beginning her collection with such an intimate ritual imparts her intention of guiding readers to a more culturally accurate representation of her people. In reflecting upon the relationships between place and story, human and land, a unifying theme can be understood: "All we know is the summit" (Nakanishi 2). An identity is more than a surface level construct. All people, whether native or foreign, can learn something from the greater powers of life.

Work Cited

Nakanishi, Laurel. *Ashore*. Tupelo Press, 2021.