

# **Building a Racial Laboratory in Hawai‘i: Knowledge and Transnationality in the Early Twentieth-Century Pacific**

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## Abstract

In the early 20th century, Hawai‘i became a dynamic site of encounters between American settlers and Japanese immigrants. With the rise of the plantation economy, the white plantation oligarchs deployed various means of discipline vis-à-vis Japanese immigrants to ensure the availability of a reliable labor force. The new regime of bodily discipline mobilized a variety of institutions, including the University of Hawai‘i and the Rockefeller Foundation. At the center of this emerging dynamic was a group of white home economists who, under the leadership of Carey D. Miller, investigated the immigrants’ bodily features, analyzed their dietary practices, and collected data essential to understanding and managing race. My project examines how Japanese immigration provided an impetus for the rise of racial science in Hawai‘i, where women and domesticity played a crucial though hitherto unacknowledged role. Historical documents at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) are essential for this investigation, as they illuminate the historical and institutional contexts within which these women operated. The letters, reports, and memoranda preserved at the RAC unveil the origin and development of a “racial laboratory” in Hawai‘i, whose formation had much to do with gender, sexual, national, and imperial dynamics proliferating in the Pacific.

# **Building a Racial Laboratory in Hawai'i: Knowledge and Transnationality in the Early Twentieth-Century Pacific**

In the early 20th century, Hawai'i became a dynamic site of encounters between American settlers and Japanese immigrants. With the rise of the plantation economy, the white plantation oligarchs in the territory deployed various means of discipline vis-à-vis Japanese immigrants, regulating their health, nutrition, and sanitation to ensure the availability of a reliable labor force.<sup>1</sup> The new regime of bodily discipline mobilized a variety of institutions, including the University of Hawai'i (UH) and the Agricultural Extension Service in the islands, as well as the American Museum of Natural History and the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) on the continent. At the center of this emerging dynamic was a group of white home economists. Under the leadership of Carey D. Miller, who joined the UH in 1922, these female experts, many of them graduates of US land-grant colleges and universities, launched a domestic science movement in the islands. Their aim was to investigate the immigrants' bodily features, analyze their dietary habits, and produce knowledge essential to understanding race.<sup>2</sup>

The development of domestic science in Hawai'i was part of the larger dynamic circulating within and beyond the US, in which studies of race constituted a prominent feature. Collaborating with American scientists such as Francis G. Benedict at the Nutritional Laboratory of the Carnegie Institution of Washington in Boston and Harry L. Shapiro at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Miller extended US race dynamics to Hawai'i, integrating the islands into the expanding network of researchers and research institutions. Far from reluctant, Japanese immigrants embraced the premise and promise of the new disciplinary regime. Situated in Hawai'i where Japanese influence was as palpable as that of the US, the immigrants, already versed in the idioms of racial improvement, domestic modernization, and national expansion emanating from their country of origin, Japan, were ready to adopt discourses and practices emerging in the territory to facilitate their assimilation as settlers of color in the US.<sup>3</sup>

My project examines how Japanese immigration provided an impetus for the rise of racial science in Hawai‘i during its territorial era (1900–1959), where women and domesticity played a salient, though hitherto unacknowledged, role. Drawing on analytical insights of such scholars as Tracy Teslow, Alexandra Stern, Warwick Anderson, Eiichiro Azuma, and Aiko Takeuchi-Demirci,<sup>4</sup> the project retraces how Japanese immigrants in the islands became a focal site of race studies, to which home economists, social and natural scientists, medical practitioners, state bureaucrats, and philanthropists were mobilized. As these historical actors pursued their respective motives and agendas, they contributed to the emerging paradigm of race, body, and modernity, turning the Pacific into a dynamic space of transnational and transcultural knowledge production.

The Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) holds a variety of historical documents essential for the project outlined above. Though offering little to no information on Carey Miller and other home economists stationed in the islands, the RAC files nonetheless shed light on local, national, and international dynamics that informed the race question, thus illuminating the cultural, historical, and institutional contexts within which these women operated. The letters, reports, and memoranda preserved at the RAC unveil the origin and development of a “racial laboratory” in Hawai‘i, recasting the islands as an unlikely and yet significant node of knowledge formation in the Trans-Pacific arena.

It is hard to ascertain exactly when the RF and the UH began to communicate, but by the mid-1920s, the two institutions were in close contact with each other. In a letter to UH president Arthur Dean, dated January 5, 1925, Edwin Embree, director of the Division of Studies at the RF, explored a prospect of creating a research center in Hawai‘i, an idea most likely originating from Dean.<sup>5</sup> A nascent vision quickly matured into a concrete plan. On April 13, 1926, Dean wrote to Embree to discuss a plausibility of establishing a “Station for Racial Research” at the UH.<sup>6</sup> The accompanying six-page proposal reveals a multifaceted research project on race and science in the tropics. Defining Hawai‘i as a “natural laboratory” for studies of race, it described a “systematic project in which the physical, mental and social aspects of race are examined as part of a coordinated program,” with sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists leading the way.

The project would identify physical, psychological, and social characteristics of prominent races in the islands (Caucasians, Hawaiians, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Portuguese, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, among others), measure environmental impacts on their characteristics, and explore consequences of hybridization (via interracial marriage). As the UH already had qualified staff in psychology and sociology, all it required was the recruitment of an anthropologist.<sup>7</sup>

A new initiative would require new funding, a request for which Dean duly submitted to the RF. The foundation was more than eager to support the new project. In a letter dated May 28, 1926, Embree communicated the decision made by the RF trustees two days earlier. The foundation would provide “a total of \$20,000 a year for a five-year period” to assist the UH to “strengthen its already good work in the biological and social sciences and to unify these departments with a view to developing a concentrated approach.” Conveying his enthusiasm for the UH project, Embree stated that the university had a unique opportunity to “study sympathetically yet scientifically a fascinating group of diverse people.” Those at the foundation “count it an honor to be able to have some part in making possible work which may be of significance not only to the Pacific but to Human Society generally.”<sup>8</sup>

The initial notification was followed by a flurry of exchanges between New York and Honolulu. Immediately, Embree sent a separate note to Dean, emphasizing the significance of recruiting an anthropologist to ensure the project’s success.<sup>9</sup> In reply, Dean inquired if Embree had any recommendations.<sup>10</sup> Three names were provided by Embree—Otto Mohr at the University of Oslo, Norway; Raymond Arthur at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa; and Frederick Wood-Jones at the University of Adelaide, Australia.<sup>11</sup> The back-and-forth between the UH and the RF often intersected with other exchanges. Amidst all this, Dean received a letter from Francis Benedict at the Nutrition Laboratory of the Carnegie Institution, in which the latter described his project on race and basal metabolism.<sup>12</sup> By the fall of 1926, the search process for new personnel concluded with the appointment of Frederick Wood-Jones.<sup>13</sup> However, the correspondence between Embree and Dean did not end there. Soon Embree dispatched another letter to Dean, suggesting this time that the UH hire a

Japanese scientist. “Not only would the presence of an Oriental scientist give an impartial standing to the research,” Embree wrote, but it would also help correct some of the “preconceptions” and “prejudice” American scientists might bring to the new project.<sup>14</sup>

As these exchanges reveal, the UH initiative generated a series of transnational dynamics within and beyond the Pacific. As Embree and Dean, two administrators driven by scientific visions and institutional ambitions, joined forces to instigate a new project on race, they articulated a link between two distant locales, New York and Honolulu. The developing tie between the East Coast and the Pacific was soon to be bolstered by Francis Benedict in Boston and Carey Miller in Honolulu who would collaborate on their joint studies of race and basal metabolism. The search for new personnel articulated another set of cross-border connections, as it involved scholars who were located in places as diverse as Europe, Africa, and Australia. Two of the candidates, Raymond Arthur and Frederick Wood-Jones, were active in the British imperial domain, moving from one colonial center to another (Sydney, London, Adelaide, Johannesburg) in pursuit of new knowledge and new positions.<sup>15</sup> British and American imperial circuits were never too far apart, but in fact closely entwined, as seen in the appointment of Wood-Jones who traversed both. Importantly, he had previously worked with Yale geologist Herbert E. Gregory at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, a leading hub for American scientists and explorers crisscrossing the Pacific.<sup>16</sup> The expanding circles of scholars and scholarship extended still further, when Embree suggested the UH project involve a Japanese scientist. At the center of all these dynamics was Hawai‘i, a stepping stone for US expansion not only in geopolitical, but also scientific terms.

In 1927, David Crawford succeeded Arthur Dean as UH president. In a letter to Embree, dated April 3, 1927, Crawford described the progress the UH had been making on its race project. Reporting on research activities of Frederick Wood-Jones (anthropology), Stanley Porteus (psychology), and Romanzo Adams (sociology), Crawford emphasized the importance of continuing support from the RF.<sup>17</sup> Embree’s reply indicated that the RF, too, was going through some changes. He was no longer in charge of the UH project; the whole matter was now in the hands of Richard Pearce in the Division of Medical Education. As Embree assured

Crawford, however, “this does not mean any diminution of my personal interest in these matters.”<sup>18</sup>

As the collaboration between the UH and the RF entered a new phase, the communication between the two not only increased in volume but also came to involve faculty members at the university. The letters, reports, and memoranda sent to the RF served the practical purpose of reporting on the project’s progress and requesting more funding.<sup>19</sup> Read closely, the same documents also provide a glimpse into the nature and scope of knowledge production proceeding in the islands, where biological understandings of race co-existed with social constructivist perspectives to reflect tensions and contradictions characteristic of the day.<sup>20</sup>

In a letter to Embree, dated August 1, 1927, Wood-Jones related his views on Hawai‘i. Having been in the islands for several months, he was still hampered by “an almost complete lack of the necessary instruments for conducting anthropological research” as well as an absence of “real laboratory accommodation” at the university. Despite this discouraging start, he had made some headway, however. Nils Larsen at Queen’s Hospital, leading authority on plantation medicine in the territory,<sup>21</sup> had introduced Wood-Jones to members of the Hawaiian Medical Society and the Queen’s Hospital. He could now count on their assistance, as they were to inform him of “all cases of still birth and of abortion in order that I might preserve all fetuses and embryos.” He had also traveled to Kaua‘i (one of the outer islands of Hawai‘i) to “secure Hawaiian skulls.” With these and other materials in possession, he would soon be ready to study “the external racial characters of embryos of pure and mixed races and later with the internal anatomy of the same subjects.”

Wood-Jones had an extensive research plan in mind. Once the necessary equipment arrived, he would “undertake a survey of adults for external characters” and study internal features at the hospital and in the museum.” He also wanted to extend his investigation to explore additional aspects of racial anatomy: “blood grouping, basal metabolism, relative immunity and a whole series of physiological tests such as special sense appreciations, etc.” Enthusiastic about his prospects in Hawai‘i, Wood-Jones told Embree that the islands’

potentials as a research site were “practically unlimited,” and insisted that a larger research center, an “Institute of Human Biology,” must be established in Hawai‘i. The island territory was a dream come true for Western scientists who were interested in exploring “the whole racial question.”<sup>22</sup>

The glowing review Wood-Jones gave of the island had partly to do with his research partnership with Stanley Porteus. Former director of research at the Vineland Training School in New Jersey, Porteus, also from Australia, had been at the UH since 1922, serving as director of Psychological Clinic and pursuing work on race, temperament, and intelligence.<sup>23</sup> The report entitled “Research Programme on Racial Difference,” which he submitted to the RF via Crawford, sheds light on the contours and contents of his undertaking, the spirit of which resonated with Wood-Jones’. Interested in mental and temperamental traits of “pure” as well as “hybrid” races, Porteus was collecting data on “prudence, foresight, planning capacity and mental alertness in relation to social adaptability” as well as “memory and school learning capacity” of school-aged children of various racial backgrounds. “In order to get sufficient numbers of cases for statistical treatment and comparison,” he was planning to extend his research from O‘ahu (where he was located) to other islands. Once the necessary equipment arrived, he would gather an additional set of information, including “certain head measurements necessary to the estimation of brain capacity.”

Porteus considered his investigation into juvenile racial traits complementary to that of Wood-Jones, who studied prenatal and adult development. The two shared similar perspectives on the value of Hawai‘i as well. Repeating a view expressed by Wood-Jones, Porteus stated, “I cannot urge too strongly that the best foundation for permanent and conclusive results in this research would be the establishment of an Institute of Race Biology at this University.”<sup>24</sup> Co-authoring a book, *The Matrix of the Mind*, Porteus and Wood-Jones promoted “the blending of the subject matter and viewpoints of two sciences” which in turn would widen as well as deepen existing knowledge on race, anatomy, and psychology. Never missing a chance to promote his institution, Crawford sent the book’s synopsis to the RF.<sup>25</sup>



At the UH, Wood-Jones and Porteus were joined by Romanzo Adams, another scholar interested in race. Having received his training from Robert Park at the University of Chicago, Adams, arriving in Hawai'i in 1920, became the founding father of sociology in the territory. Complimenting Wood-Jones and Porteus, Adams approached race from a sociological perspective: What would be the process and consequences of cultural intermingling of people of diverse backgrounds in the islands? Addressing the question of racial purity and hybridity also pursued by Wood-Jones and Porteus, Adams reframed it in social-cultural terms. Concerned with cultural transmission as well as transformation, he was eager to figure out how social contacts among races would “serve to modify each of the contributing culture systems and to create a new system embracing modified elements of the old systems and also new elements.” Concentrating on family as the primary site of his analysis, Adams explored the process of interracial marriage and family (dis)organization, cultural conflict and accommodation, and racial segregation and amalgamation.

Similar to his colleagues, Adams considered Hawai'i an ideal “laboratory”: the islands offered as “an unusually good center from which to study some of the important aspects of race contacts through migration.” Small, isolated, and uncomplicated (i.e., unaffected by ill effects of modernization and industrialization), the territory presented a compact universe containing a finite number of racial variations whose original cultures were readily ascertainable and whose transformations (through immigration, settlement, and contact) were easily observable.<sup>26</sup> In his subsequent career, Adams went on to promote Hawai'i as a “melting pot” in which people of diverse racial backgrounds would co-exist, accommodate, and amalgamate.<sup>27</sup>

Situated in the remote territory in the Pacific, Wood-Jones, Porteus, and Adams played crucial roles in transforming Hawai'i into a “racial laboratory” in the early twentieth century. Participating in the interdisciplinary studies of race, they circulated new and old idioms of race while also articulating cross-border connections among scholars and scholarship. As my project combines the information obtained at the RAC with archival materials on Carey Miller and other home economists located in Hawai'i and elsewhere, it will produce a historical picture not only more complete but also more complicated. At one level,

American domestic scientists in Hawai'i were transgressive. Traveling to the distant colony and pursuing public careers, they articulated female mobility in social, physical, and geographical terms. Exerting their authority as "scientists," they embodied the mission of home economics whose foundational vision revolved around creating a space for women in academia dominated by men.<sup>28</sup> The field of home economics was subversive in not only gender but also sexual terms, as it nurtured female partnership among its practitioners and spawned an alternative community of women against the reigning norm of heterosexuality.<sup>29</sup> Carey Miller articulated all of these dynamics. Interested in science, she militated against the conventional expectations of femininity and domesticity, building a successful career as a researcher and reformer. Born and raised in Boise, Idaho, she left the Intermountain West, relocating to California and then New York and eventually making her way into the new and unknown frontier of the Pacific. Forming a lifelong partnership with Ada Erwin, another home economist who taught at Punahou School in Honolulu, Miller pursued an alternative form of intimacy in her private life.

Despite these instances of transgression, Miller and her female colleagues in Hawai'i were also complicit in the dominant workings of power. Traveling to the far-flung colony in the Pacific, they were not only taking part in "manifest destiny." Their discourses and practices pertaining to race, body, and science often mirrored those of their male counterparts, articulating biological (rather than social constructivist) understandings of race. Approaching homes as the chief site of investigation as well as intervention, they were instrumental in bringing the logic and logistics of empire into the domestic space of Asian immigrants and indigenous islanders. In more ways than one, they contributed to dynamics of US expansionism. The link between empire and domesticity, suggested by critical studies of empire, was more than visible in these women's lives.<sup>30</sup> Analyzing dynamics of gender, race, sexuality, nation, and empire that proliferated in the Pacific, this project will illuminate the complex and convoluted nature of female scientific pursuit in the age of empire.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Pau Hana: Plantation Life and Labor in Hawaii, 1835–1920* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1984)

<sup>2</sup> Barry Brennan and James Hollyer eds., *Hawai'i's College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources: Celebrating the First 100 Years* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2008). For a biographical account of Carey Miller, see Mildred Osmundson Gordon, *Makers of Destiny, Hawaiian Style: The Stories of Pioneer Women Educators in Hawaii* (Honolulu: Delta Kappa Gama Society, International, Beta Beta State, 1969), 202–205

<sup>3</sup> For the notion of Japanese immigrants as “settlers,” see Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Okamura, eds., *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai'i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Tracy Teslow, *Constructing Race: The Science of Bodies and Cultures in American Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Alexandra Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health, and Racial Destiny in Australia* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); Eiichiro Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Aiko Takeuchi-Demirci, *Contraceptive Diplomacy: Reproductive Politics and Imperial Ambitions in the United States and Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Edwin Embree to Arthur Dean, January 5, 1925, Folder 2, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Dean to Edwin Embree, April 13, 1926, Folder 2, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>7</sup> University of Hawaii, Honolulu, T.H., “A Proposed Station for Racial Research,” April 13, 1926, Folder 2, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>8</sup> Embree to Dean, May 28, 1926, Folder 2, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>9</sup> Embree to Dean, May 28, 1926, Folder 2, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>10</sup> Dean to Embree, June 16, 1926, Folder 2, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>11</sup> Embree to Dean, July 20, 1926, Folder 2, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>12</sup> Dean to Embree, August 27, 1926, Folder 2, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center. Later, Carey Miller collaborated with Benedict and co-authored a piece on race and metabolism in the Pacific: Carey D. Miller and Francis Gano Benedict, “Basal Metabolism of Normal Young Men and Women of Various Races in Hawaii and Metabolism of Samoan Men,” University of Hawaii Research Publications No. 15, 1937, Hamilton Library, University of Hawai'i at Manoa.

<sup>13</sup> Dean to Embree, October 5, 1926, Folder 2, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>14</sup> Embree to Dean, October 8, 1926, Folder 2, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>15</sup> Embree to Dean, July 20, 1926, Folder 2, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

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- <sup>16</sup> Bob Krauss, *Keneti: South Seas Adventures of Kenneth Emory* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1988).
- <sup>17</sup> Crawford to Embree, April 3, 1927, Folder 3, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
- <sup>18</sup> Embree to Crawford, May 9, 1927, Folder 3, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
- <sup>19</sup> Crawford to Pearce, October 21, 1927, Folder 3, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
- <sup>20</sup> Teslow, *Constructing Race*.
- <sup>21</sup> Jean Kim, "Experimental Encounters: Filipino and Hawaiian Bodies in the U.S. Imperial Invention of Odontoclasia, 1928–1946," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 3, August 2010, 523–546.
- <sup>22</sup> Wood-Jones to Embree, August 1, 1927, Folder 3, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
- <sup>23</sup> David Stannard, "Honoring Racism: The Professional Life and Reputation of Stanley D. Porteus," Ibrahim Aoude ed., *The Ethnic Studies Story: Politics and Social Movements in Hawai'i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 85–125.
- <sup>24</sup> Stanley Porteus, "Research Programme on Racial Differences," October 21, 1927, Folder 3, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
- <sup>25</sup><sup>25</sup> Excerpts of Frederic Wood-Jones and Stanley Porteus, *The Matrix of the Mind* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1928), Folder 3, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
- <sup>26</sup> Romanzo Adams, "The aims of the sociological studies of racial groups in Hawaii and the relation of such studies to the whole research project carried on through the endowment by the Rockefeller Foundation," October 23, 1927, Folder 3, Box 1, Series 214, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
- <sup>27</sup> See, for example, Romanzo Adams, *Interracial Marriage in Hawaii: A Study of the Mutually Conditioned Processes of Acculturation and Amalgamation* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1937).
- <sup>28</sup> Megan Elias, *Stir It Up: Home Economics in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).
- <sup>29</sup> Megan Elias, "'Model Mamas': The Domestic Partnership of Home Economics Pioneers Flora Rose and Martha Van Rensselaer," *Journal of History of Sexuality*, Vol. 15, No. 1, January 2006, 65–88.
- <sup>30</sup> See, for examples of critical analysis of empire and domesticity: Jane Eimonsen, *Making Home Work: Domesticity and Native American Assimilation in the American West, 1860–1919* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Mire Koikari, *Cold War Encounters in US-Occupied Okinawa: Women, Militarized Domesticity, and Transnationalism in East Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).