

DownWind Productions: *détournement* Hawai‘i

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DownWind Productions is ‘**a collaborative of artists, writers, teachers and activists who examine the impact of colonialism, capitalism, and tourism in Hawai‘i**’.¹ Founded by members of the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa in 1998-99, DownWind is the brainchild of artist Gaye Chan and art historian Andrea Feeser (now at Clemson University in South Carolina). Sociologist Nandita Sharma, who joined the University of Hawai‘i’s Ethnic Studies and Sociology Departments later, has also become a key member of the group. She and Chan have collaborated on a number of activist and art projects. DownWind Production’s name suggests several things: that these producers see themselves as inseparable from what they make and that they value having a collective identity. Since careful strategising informs everything they do, they explain that DownWind is subject ‘**to everything that happens and happened upwind. When hunting, it is recommended that you position yourself downwind of the hunted.**’² Poetic in spirit, this description also stakes a claim to the material substrate of land on which life-and-death contests are waged. Yet, these activists work together across various mediums and wield such potent weapons as writing (which nineteenth-century Hawaiians avidly learned writing from missionaries), the production of

websites, souvenirs and photography to explore our/your desires (in phantasmagoria as an overly pictorialized, staged, and state-administered life tied to colonial struggles) and hope (‘**perhaps**’ ultimately to offer ‘**a working model for future self-sustenance for the people of Hawai‘i**’).

DownWind situates their work in the tradition of agitprop, a term that is a combination of the Russian words for agitation and propaganda, first used by Georgy Plekhanov. Agitprop originally referred to the Russian revolutionaries’ techniques of political education, including agitation trains, posters, and cinema that were used in Russia after the revolution of 1917. DownWind even sells agitprop travel souvenirs, such as attractively packaged pieces of concrete. These commodities, sold at stores and online, pull at our desires to consume and provoke our revulsion at the concrete jungle that Waikīkī has become. These trinkets inform us that, before serving a tourist population, Waikīkī was home to a royal compound, flowing waters, and a greater diversity of crops than that grown today, including taro. The group explains, ‘**We distribute information and agitprop commodities through the marketplace and e-commerce to help tourists and locals alike understand our complicity in the decimation of Hawai‘i’s land and people, and to imagine**

DownWind Productions. *Historic Waikiki* (2003-present) : website www.downwindproductions.com and *Souvenirs, Series 1: No. 1 to 4*

different relationships with each other and with our own desires and longings’.

Building on the work of many scholars, including Barry S. Nakamura’s research on the effects of draining the Ala Wai Canal **‘for development purposes’** which destroyed **‘land and farming ventures in the process’**³, Feeser argues that, **‘Waikiki’s transformation from a self-sustaining Native Hawaiian community to an urban resort town’** can be historically traced.⁴ In an interview given on the occasion of an exhibition of *Historic Waikiki* that was held in 2004 at the Asia Society in New York,⁵ Chan added that the effect of dredging the canal in the 1920s **‘under the pretext of mosquito eradication...succeeded in destroying all the food farming and converted the fertile wetlands into prime tourist investment properties’**.⁶ In contrast to the fictions proffered about land reclamation projects by settlers, developers, and the US military as social welfare projects or initiatives for the benefit of the community’s health, DownWind’s work highlights how the theft of Hawai‘i was carried out in the interests of US state power and to the benefit of a few industrialists and developers.

After the overthrow of Queen Lili‘u-o-ka-lani on 14 January 1893, the fruit magnate Sanford Dole was proclaimed the first President of the Republic of Hawai‘i. This *coup d’etat* by proclamation was carried out by a cadre of American businessmen acting in cahoots with members of the Queen’s own cabinet and the minister plenipotentiary John L. Stevenson, the Scottish author of *Treasure Island*. Their illegal acts were precipitated by the Queen’s attempt to enact a new constitution that would have returned powers taken away by a Bayonet Constitution back to her family’s monarchy and to the local people.⁷ As they were facing the threat of a native Hawaiian insurgency, the American

businessmen plotted with Stevenson, who formed a Committee for Safety and proclaimed something akin to a state of emergency. In an act of unprecedented sovereignty, Stevenson acted on his own, called in US Navy, and ultimately proclaimed: **‘A Provisional Government having been duly constituted in the place of the recent Government of Queen Lili‘u-o-ka-lani and said Provisional Government being in possession of the Government Building, the Archives and the Treasury and is in control of the capital of the Hawaiian Islands, I hereby recognize said Provisional Government as the de facto Government of the Hawaiian Islands’**.⁸ The Queen was imprisoned for a time and she was never allowed to declare her rightful successor as the Princess Ka‘iulani. Despite the blatant lawlessness of these events, the regime change secured for the US exclusive rights to use Hawai‘i for commercial and primarily military purposes after its annexation in 1898.

The state’s largest industry remains tourism and the second largest one, with over one hundred and sixty military installations and the control of vast areas of ocean surrounding the Hawaiian archipelago, is the US Department of Defense.⁹ As is well-known the military initiated the technology behind the internet as a communications system, but today tourism is one of the internet’s major online industries. DownWind Production’s first line of attack was to initiate a travel Web site, *Historic Waikiki* (2003-present), www.downwindproductions.com. This site includes a timeline with overtly manipulated (*détourned*) historical advertisements, borrowing those used between the 1940s and 60s to entice tourists to visit Hawai‘i. The year 1941, for example, is represented by some strapping Hawaiians, who are shown without a care in the world, carrying a boat over a sandy beach, while the text tells another story: **‘Kaho‘olawe, one of the islands of the Hawaiian chain, was**



Andrea Feeser
(author) and
Gaye Chan (art
& design). Open
Folio photograph
of the book
*WAIKĪKĪ: A
History of
Forgetting &
Remembering*,
pp. 108-109

made into a target for bombing practice by the US military and its allies'. Visitors to the site are asked whether these images and events make them angry, as their willingness to become involved is prompted.

On this website, DownWind publish other evidence of local activities in community organizing, artistic production, and research that aim to redress the social conditions and transformations that industry and landholders have masked since the nineteenth century while they have worked to create Hawai'i as a spectacle of artificially built beaches, landscapes and exoticized people to be consumed. The entrance to the site is emblazoned with stunning images from Chan's *Flagrante Delicto* photographic series. Colloquially, the term also refers to being caught while having sex but the Latin name in legal terminology also refers to flagrant acts in which the crime is "*blazing*" and where someone is caught "*red-handed*" in the act of committing a crime. Chan's fiery orange-and-red pictures of bodies, shadows, and water evoke and play on the multiple meanings of these words, but the horizontal shapes and the feel of these pictures also make transparent the medium of print, their indexical meanings as well as many photographic negatives. Close your eyes and you might just hear Johnny Rotten's vehement and ironic declaration: '**I don't want a holiday in the sun. I want to go to the new Belsen. I want to see some history**'.¹⁰

Allowing us to see history as something that has been made (and is not natural) is something DownWind does exceedingly well. *Historic Waikiki*'s introductory page seems the very image of hospitality, offering three entry points to the site: *kanaka maoli* (defined in the group's dictionary entry as '**n. Hawaiian person**'), *kama'aina* ('**Native-born, one born in a place, host**'), or *haole* ('**White person, American,**

Englishmen, Caucasian; formerly, any foreigner').¹¹ This choice may be experienced as pleasurable, exotic, off-putting, or exclusionary. Regardless, all three entry points lead to the same place, i.e., to a schematic map of Waikiki (located southeast of Honolulu), showing territory stretching from the southeastern coast of the island of O'ahu to the site of the now paved-over Ala Wai Canal, which forms the map's northern perimeter. Overlaid on a velvety black ground, the red-lined map is punctuated with glowing dots that connect via hypertext links to stories that DownWind has collected. Inspired by Native American Leslie Marmon Silko's claim that stories are to be taken up and used as weapons by the Pueblos,¹² *Historic Waikiki*'s focus is on telling people's stories – of capitalism, military operations, coercion, the privatization of land, and the artificiality of modern Hawai'i. This effort also exposes the '**colonization of imagination**'¹³ that can lead people to doubt their own lived experiences when confronted with the overwhelming number of fictive representations of history, places, and their own lives.¹⁴ The assembled micro-histories show that Waikiki has been plotted (as a destination and a place on a map), plotted like a *coup d'etat*, and that it has also been emplotted (tragically inscribed and invested) by special interests. In addressing local knowledge, DownWind remains attentive to communal efforts at self-determination and resistance in Hawai'i. Feeser also acknowledges the influence of Roland Barthes in her analysis of these contemporary myths.

The group uses their web work to subvert the coordinates of tourism via the Internet and does so in the manner of Hans Bernhard's digital red herring, *E-Toy.com*, which brilliantly laid the groundwork for agitprop e-commerce, such as *The Yes Men's Gatt.org* and *WTO.org*. *Historic Waikiki*

interferes in the virtual space by presenting itself as a gateway to tourism and commerce and by entering into the marketplace and its practices of exchange with its postcards and souvenirs available by e-commerce. DownWind's website also cleverly calls for the democratization of information. According to Feeser, some of the reasons for using digital media in this work are: **'1) to critique Waikīkī, a capitalist and colonialist simulation of Hawai'i that exemplifies many non-Hawaiians' desire to use Hawai'i to fulfill their own needs; and 2) to connect our audience to Hawaiian representations of Hawai'i that reject non-Hawaiians' appropriation of Hawai'i'**.¹⁵ Feeser has also explained ways that DownWind avails itself of a real estate model of the Internet, which involves thinking about cyberspace as a pliable, symbolic territory rather than a network. Thus, she has written that the Internet **'is often described in topographical terms as a 'new frontier' to be explored and organized productively... This territorialization drives major battles among competing capitalist interests, just as many former and current colonies have been and are fought over by corporations'**.¹⁶ With similar ideals, Feeser's current research is an examination of the cultivation of indigo in eighteenth-century South Carolina. **'Development'**, she says, **'is the key, because those involved with it believe that they are improving land - or cyberspace in the context of the Internet. I think spaces that fall out of [that kind of] reality are those that are conceived in terms of stewardship and inclusive community.'**¹⁷ Although Chan shrugs off the idea that the technological medium itself was attractive to her (she never set out to make web art *per se*) and Feeser acknowledges that the web can be alienating, DownWind's use of the internet stems from the desire to communicate with large numbers of people. Their website rather gently sends messages that have hardly begun to arrive on the shores of the USA.

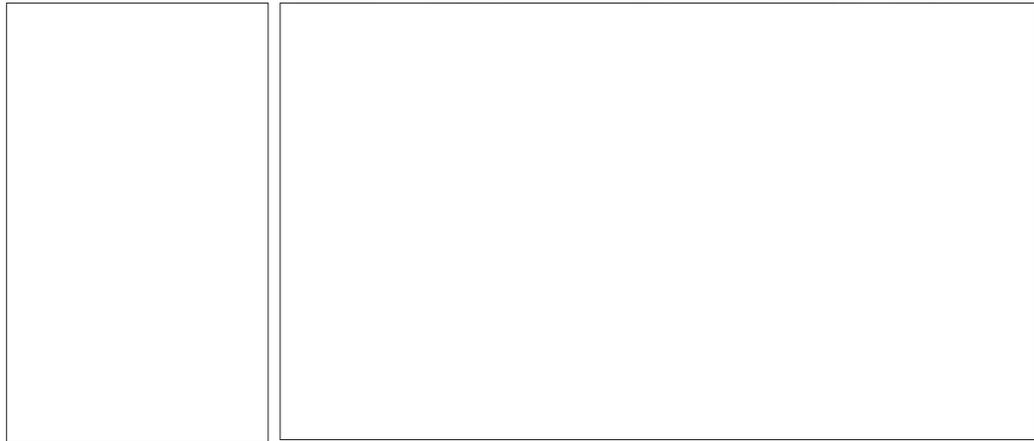
Another DownWind production is the sumptuous, agitprop coffee table book, authored by Feeser with art and design by Chan. In what I consider one of the best imaginable collaborations in art history and art making, Feeser and Chan decouple the innocence of tourism and paradisiacal idylls from the creation of an economy in which Hawai'i is wholly dependent on the US. This means explaining the ways that **"development"** of land is better understood as a process of decimating indigenous land divisions (*Ahupua'a*), water resources, and sustainable crops in favor of a system of private property ownership (which favored foreign-born elites rather than *kanaka maoli*) and non-native crops, such as sugar and

pineapple, that were cultivated on plantations with peasant labor from Japan, Korea, China, the Philippines, and other places. Feeser's text invites contemplation even as she offers an unflinching look at colonialism and capitalism's impact on Hawai'i. Her writing forms a counterpoint to the transformation of Hawai'i by missionaries, mercantile capitalists, planters, and other settlers, including the US military and tourists. It is thoroughly captivating to see the wealth of ethnographic and archival research she has gathered and which pertains to the history of land and citizenry in Hawai'i.

Chan designed *WAIKĪKĪ: A History of Forgetting & Remembering* to emphasize the haptic nature of what is portrayed so that the objects shown themselves become indexical traces with shadows, bearing tattered or frayed edges, and this allows her to imbue them with a facticity that is neither inert nor singular. A graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute and Professor of photography, Chan's brilliant choices in the book are extremely thoughtful and worthy of the reader's full attention. Images of doubles and reversals – of highly scripted welcomes for tourists at airports – in full color are juxtaposed with framed illustrations, sequences of **"before"** and **"after"** photographs of landscapes that are reproduced recto and verso on the same page. Similarly photographs of crowds of tourists taken from slightly different viewpoints may appear separated by several pages of text and other images. The notion of requiring readers (and viewers of Chan's installations) to double back as they move through the work appeals to Chan. She courts this kind of reading with a rich palimpsest of images and historical documents. Feeser's writing likewise creates a **'mood'** which encourages **'critical contemplation'**. The intensive overlapping in all areas of the book slows us down. Regardless of how rapidly we may wish to flip through the book, Chan and Feeser demands that we take care and pay attention, and start to question our desire to consume. In this way they subvert the traditions of the coffee table book even though we are consistently confronted with the glut of photo opportunities, vacation pictures, and postcards that structure the appearance of Hawai'i.

A crucial ingredient of Chan's thinking seems to be how to balance what it means to encounter objects, pictures, and writing via a high speed internet versus with a slower, more purposeful pace of experience that print mediums can elicit. As she noted in 2004, **'both cartography and photography feed us the illusion of knowing'**.¹⁸ It is therefore not surprising to find the mass phenomena of studio pictures,

Gaye Chan and Nandita Sharma. *Eating in Public* (2003 - present) *Free Store – Kailua location* (2007) *Eating in Public, Second Edition* (2006) Wood display case, offset printed book, seeds (corn, squash, bean)



and the images evoked by picture postcards, boldly thematized in Chan's and Sharma's *There There* (2005): another web work at www.gayechan.com/there_there/. Created with support from the Longwood Arts Project and Bronx Council on the Arts, *There There*, is the result of a two way exchange between the artists and the commercial photographers in small studios in cities all over the world. Chan and Sharma ask for a portrait of themselves with a fantasy background and then take a portrait of the photographer's studio. The fantasy and the reality of photographic studios is juxtaposed. The project crisscrosses the complexities of life in what Martin Heidegger called **'the age of the world picture'** with the global marketplace of these little photographic portrait studios that populate all major cities and offer sitters highly abstract backdrops against which to appear to be both anywhere and nowhere. In 1938, the German philosopher claimed that **'the fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture. The word "picture" [Bild] now means the structured image [Gebild] that is the creature of man's producing which represents and sets before. In such producing, man contends for the position in which he can be that particular being who gives the measure and draws up the guidelines for everything that is.'**¹⁹ Chan and Sharma demonstrate in a wonderful accompanying text how the world's era of the portrait image as a self-confident artifice is full of dislocating experiences that attend in varying degrees to instantaneous telecommunications, modern modes of travel, and imaging technologies. Their portraits are taken posed in front of oddly repetitious and strangely familiar backdrops. For example, smiling like blissfully, in front of

palm fronds, ocean and sand (at a Sears Studio in Honolulu)! The storefronts of each photography studio appear adjacent to these portraits of Chan and Sharma.

By contrast, threaded through the various works on spectacular Hawai'i, one finds not only resistance, but desires to achieve happiness and self-sustenance in the age of the world picture. Chan, Feeser, and Sharma understand this is no small task and that we have been sold a bill of goods by the state and capitalism. Heidegger himself urged real reflection, rejecting traditional research and arguing against scientific systems and other kinds of order that govern how we see the world. This is also the direction that Chan and Sharma take in their *Eating in Public* (2003-present) project where they economically reject the interrelationship of science, industrial farming, and biopiracy (the patenting of seeds by corporations). Chan and Sharma become artists-as-Diggers to confront constant interference by the state in **'common understandings of public land use'**²⁰. They follow the lead of seventeenth century Diggers of England and the twentieth century hippy Diggers of San Francisco, in securing what they regard as common land and making 'illegal' use of it. So far, *Eating in Public* includes a thoughtful and well-illustrated book, two functioning free stores (where goods are freely exchanged), and a free papaya seed-planting project in public places. **'The seed is the ultimate Free Store'**, write Chan and Sharma. They recognize that seeds have become **'a key site for colonial struggle'** as both land and seeds are turned **'into commodities through patenting'**²¹ by both business corporations and the state. This project has become an alternative to the state's dysfunctional recycling project, called *Hi-5*, and the artists plan to extend it by gathering a map of edible plants in Hawai'i and developing an anarchist recycling system in

O'ahu. In the end, these activists leave us smiling with free papayas and some sharp rebellious signs placed on homemade recycling bins: '*HI-5! Take, Leave, Whatevas...*'²²

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Notes

1. A list of participants and production teams can be found on the Web site, and DownWind Productions now includes all the people who have ever contributed to their Web site, *Historic Waikiki* (2003-present), at www.downwindproductions.com.
2. Unattributed comments in this essay have been culled from the group's Web site.
3. Andrea Feeser, correspondence with the author, October 2008. Feeser emphasizes that DownWind Productions honors resistance movements in Hawai'i and the research of numerous Native Hawaiian scholars, including Barry Seichi Nakamura 'The Story of Waikiki and the "Reclamation" Project' (Master's thesis, University of Hawai'i, 1979); Noenoe K. Silva *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) and 'Kū'ē! Hawaiian Women's Resistance to the Annexation' Social Process in Hawai'i. Women in Hawai'i: Sites, Identities, *Voices* 38 (1997) pp. 2-15; Haunani-Kay Trask *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1993)
4. Andrea Feeser (author) and Gaye Chan (art & design) *WAIKĪKĪ: A History of Forgetting & Remembering* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006) p. 1
5. *Paradise Now? Contemporary Art from the Pacific Asia Society* (New York, US, 2004); *Historic Waikiki* has also been included in Artconcept Festival St. Petersburg, Russia, 2004; Netzspannung.org Fraunhofer Institute for Media Communication, Darmstadt, Germany, 2003; and Web Biennial, Istanbul Contemporary Art Museum, Istanbul, 2003.
6. Gaye Chan quoted in 'Q & A: Reena Jana Talks to Gaye Chan' *Art and AsiaPacific* 41 Summer (2004) p. 66
7. That illegal constitution had, among other conditions, created voter requirements that limited voting to foreign-elites and the small number of Hawaiian landowners. It prevented approximately 75% of the *kanaka maoli* population from voting. Her planned constitution would have returned power to her as sovereign monarch and to *kanaka maoli* as citizenry.
8. See Stephen Kinzer *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* New York: Henry Holt and Company LLC, 2006) p.
9. Hawai'i was thus annexed to the US in 1898 and later incorporated

- into the US as a state in 1959, following an election in which only Hawaiians who renounced their native citizenship were allowed to vote.
9. '**Today Hawai'i is the critical center of the US Pacific Command, the largest unified military command in the nation. This command handles military operations for more than half of the earth's surface and 60 percent of the world's population**'; see Adria L. Imada 'The Army Learns to Luau: Imperial Hospitality and Military Photography in Hawai'i' *The Contemporary Pacific* 20:2 (2008) pp. 331-32
 10. Building on his graphic featuring '**nicer people**' and a cartoonish Belgian tourist brochure, whose text Jamie Reid altered to include 'A Holiday in Someone Else's Misery' for the sleeve to the Sex Pistols' song 'Holidays in the Sun/Satellite' 45, released 14.10.77, Virgin VS. See Jamie Reid *The Incomplete Works of Jamie Reid: Up They Rise* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1987) p. 8 and pp. 72-75
 11. The Web site's dictionary entries '**are modified excerpts**' from an authoritative text: Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert *Hawaiian Dictionary* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986)
 12. Leslie Marmon Silko Ceremony (New York: Viking, 1977) p. 2
 13. Gaye Chan quoted in 'Q & A: Reena Jana Talks to Gaye Chan' *Art and AsiaPacific* 41 Summer (2004) p. 65
 14. For a very important discussion of the role of stories and the '**practice of cultural competencies**' in Hawai'i see Cristina Bacchilega *Legendary Hawai'i and the Politics of Place: Tradition, Translation, and Tourism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007) p. 17
 15. Andrea Feeser 'Real-time and Digital Communication in and about Contested Hawai'i: The Public Art Project *Historic Waikiki*' *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 5:3 (2001); <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/Jouvert/v5i3/feeser.htm> accessed 2 October 2003
 16. In the short story 'Burning Chrome' (1982) in *Omni* magazine, sf writer William Gibson first used the term '**cyberspace**'. In the same story, he rendered a matrix model of virtual reality.
 17. Andrea Feeser, in correspondence with the author October 2008
 18. Gaye Chan quoted in 'Q & A: Reena Jana Talks to Gaye Chan' *Art and AsiaPacific* 41 Summer (2004) p. 66
 19. Martin Heidegger 'The Age of the World Picture' in William Lovitt (ed. and trans.) *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977) pp. 129-33
 20. Gaye Chan and Nandita Sharma *Eating in Public* (Kane'ohe: TinFish Press, 2004) p. 5; subsequent editions were published in Spring 2006 and Fall 2006.
 21. Sharma has likewise explored and expounded on these principals in her work in the Basmati Action Group and the Open the Borders! group that is based in Vancouver, Canada. She has enjoyed a long history of activism that relates to her academic research.
 22. Gaye Chan, in correspondence with the author November 2008.