

“Doing our Duty”: Dancing, Dating, and the Limits of Tolerance in Wartime Hawai‘i

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IN A SERIES of candid images, a soldier stationed in Hawai‘i during World War II photographed a celebration for the men in his unit. Men are crowded around a table, some standing, some sitting, eating a meal that clearly was not regular Army chow. A chef beamed into the camera, showing off a sheet cake decorated with the words “Wishes one and all Merry Xmas and Happy New Year.” [Fig. 1] In addition to the meal, the soldiers were entertained by a band composed entirely of soldiers. The band was backed by four men who were singing and clapping to keep the beat. [Fig. 2] Other photographs are less lively. Pictures of the dance floor show dozens of men standing against the wall looking enviously at the three or four men who were clearly enjoying the company of the few women in attendance. As happy as they might have been for the diversion—a good meal and musical entertainment—they must have been disappointed that so few women chose to attend a dance held in their honor.

Dances and parties like this one were commonplace in Hawai‘i during World War II. The USO (United Services Organization) and other social agencies worked tirelessly to entertain the thousands of

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servicemen who crowded into Hawai'i during the war years. Servicemen always outnumbered women; it was often necessary to recruit women from churches or school groups, transport them to and from the event, and chaperone them while they were there. More often than not they were willing participants, eager to do their part, raising the morale of the troops by providing female companionship for



FIGURES 1 AND 2. "African American soldiers at a Christmas party in Hawai'i circa 1942. Original photo postcard from the collection of Lynn Davis."

servicemen far from home. But these images illustrate a problem that was more complicated and difficult to solve than the ratio of men to women.

The crush of military personnel was a burden on the citizens of Hawai‘i, a war zone where there were restrictions and obligations that Americans on the continent did not have to endure. As servicemen began to pour into Hawai‘i, the task of keeping them entertained became part of civilian volunteer work. Churches hosted picnics after Sunday services and individual families or community groups invited servicemen into their homes for meals. Professional musicians and hula hālau also volunteered their talents and performed ceaselessly on bases, on ships, and in isolated camps. Young women in the Territory took on additional duties. They were asked—sometimes compelled—to attend social events and act as companions and dance partners for servicemen. It was a part of their patriotic duty, a way to help maintain the morale of the troops. This was a pleasant diversion for some, but it was also fraught with sexual tension. Young women—many of them just teenagers—were being invited to parties and social events that, while supervised, put them in close physical contact with older and more sexually mature men. These encounters were also

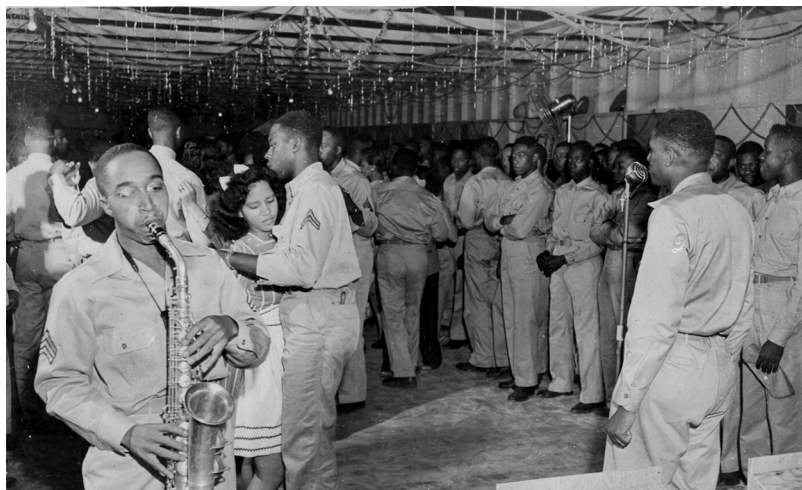


FIGURE 3. African American soldiers at a Christmas party in Hawai‘i circa 1942. Original photo postcard from the collection of Lynn Davis.

replete with racial tension. Prior to the war, local women (women of color and mixed race women from Hawai'i's many ethnic communities) rarely socialized with Haole men. And White men from racially homogenous American towns who would never have encountered an Asian or Hawaiian woman, had to face any prejudices they had against people of color. The situation was made even more volatile when African American servicemen competed with White men for the attention of these women. Although local women felt it was their patriotic duty to dance with all men who attended these events, they faced the limits of their tolerance when African American men were involved. Local women were forced to confront their own prejudices and were sometimes put in an uncomfortable or dangerous position of having to mediate disputes between Black and White servicemen.

This paper discusses these racially and sexually charged encounters between local women, White servicemen, and African American servicemen that took place on the intimate space of the dance floor and illustrates the shifting racial dynamics caused by the war. For the first time, local people were encountering Whites who were not members of Hawai'i's elite, not necessarily well educated, and certainly not wealthy. This eroded the façade of White supremacy that formed the basis of Hawai'i's social structure. The number of servicemen pursuing local women inevitably led to an increase in the number of interracial relationships and marriages in some communities where such relationships had been anathema. And the arrival of a large number of African Americans forced local people to confront their own latent racial prejudice, something that challenged their idealism and self-perception as tolerant and free from the bigotry that plagued the United States.

The voices, experiences, and reflections described here were recorded by students at the University of Hawai'i during World War II. As part of their work in sociology classes, they interviewed and observed their families, friends, and neighbors and reported their findings to their professors. Their work is now a part of the Romanzo Adams Social Research Laboratory (RASRL) collection at the Archives and Special Collections department of Hamilton Library, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. The collection contains thousands of documents, papers, and other material generated by the members of the sociology department and their students. These sources offer unique

first-person narratives that illustrate the war years in Hawai'i from a vantage point that is not often considered: young men and women who were coming of age at such a precarious time.¹

"THERE WERE SOLDIERS, SOLDIERS EVERYWHERE."

Long before the start of the war, the residents of Hawai'i had grown accustomed to if not entirely comfortable with the presence of the US military. A total of fifteen large military posts and installations were built between 1898 and 1941. Estimates as to the size of US forces in the territory varied. Looking back on that era, the sociologist Andrew Lind showed that the total number of soldiers, sailors, and marines in Hawai'i grew from 1,608 in 1910 to 16,291 in 1930. "The 1940 census showed that the military personnel in Hawaii, excluding commissioned officers, professional and clerical workers, and craftsmen, had increased to 26,233."² Gwenfread Allen, who chronicled the war years, estimated that there were some 43,000 soldiers on O'ahu at the start of the war. "In the first six months of the war, the total swelled to 135,000."³ Naval personnel grew from 5,800 in 1941 to 20,000 a year later. In short, millions of soldiers, sailors, marines, war workers, and civilian defense employees were stationed in or passed through the territory during World War II.⁴

Quite suddenly there were soldiers everywhere: building defense outposts near rural towns, training in the rugged terrain of the Wai'anae and Ko'olau mountains. They took over Buddhist churches and Japanese language schools for their offices and camped on the outskirts of plantation towns. They were impossible to avoid. When they were off duty they were on the beaches and the busses, in restaurants and theaters, crowding the streets of downtown Honolulu. They were a boisterous presence, eager and anxious young men who wanted to blow off steam when they were not training or waiting to be deployed. They could be unpleasant, insulting locals with racial epithets. They could also be polite and shy, eager to experience something that would remind them of home. They staged boxing matches and fielded sports teams to compete in local leagues. They performed precision drills and held concerts for spectators. They attended local churches and ate in local restaurants. They were ubiquitous, rubbing shoulders with local people from every walk of life.

And nearly all were White, a fact that did not go unnoticed or un-commented upon. White servicemen and defense workers were nothing like local Haoles. They were working class “Okies” and “Arkies,” who were sometimes poorly educated. They spoke English with a wide variety of accents and did not necessarily possess the polish and grace of Hawai‘i’s White upper classes. After years of being told that locals were socially if not racially inferior, servicemen and defense workers were proof that this was not the case. Local people “learn[ed] at first hand that haoles didn’t necessarily have to be educated, that they could do their own work, that they had their poor people. They began to lose their fear and lost the feeling of awe when coming into contact with them.”⁵ Suddenly it became clear that being White did not make a person superior. One informant recorded some of the comments that reflected this change in attitude:

“I’m through being scared of the haoles,” “I’m just as good as them,” . . . “They ain’t so hot,” and “I may be a ‘Buddha-head’ but I’m just as good as a haole,” were . . . getting to be common expressions.”

And after witnessing the behavior of a crowd of drunken servicemen, one boy was heard to say, “They mo’ worse than us.”⁶

White servicemen came to Hawai‘i with all the preconceived notions and stereotypes fed to them by Hollywood movies: swaying palms and docile natives. What they found was quite a bit more complicated. The “natives” were not docile and the local population was largely comprised of immigrants and their children from China, Japan, Korea, Portugal, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico. Some White servicemen were obviously disturbed by the ethnic diversity of Hawai‘i especially the number of Asians whom they lumped together under the racial epithet “gook”: “Orientals still looked oriental, and here as elsewhere the American servicemen seemed unwilling or unable to differentiate between what was simply foreign and what was enemy.”⁷ One informant witnessed a sailor who “. . . after watching and listening for several minutes, remarked loudly that back home he had never seen or heard ‘niggers’ eating slop on a street corner.”⁸ The Army eventually issued a pamphlet that educated soldiers about Hawai‘i, carefully delineating the various ethnic groups and taking care to pronounce them all Americans. They were sternly warned: “Now get this straight. Most of these [sic] went to American schools. They learned

to pledge allegiance to the same flag you salute. They like American soft drinks. And one of their favorite radio performers is Bob Hope. They're Americans."⁹

"500 MEN TO A GIRL"

Servicemen complained endlessly about Hawai'i: the food was unfamiliar, the weather was too hot, they had money but nothing to spend it on. They were gouged by bar owners and cab drivers. And there were no hula girls except for young women wearing cellophane skirts and artificial lei who would only pose with them (for a fee) in studio portraits. However, they were most unhappy about the dearth of women, something they felt they had a right to like fresh water and food. The idea that there were 500 men to a girl may not have been factually accurate but it must have felt true, especially if by "women" they meant "White women." They *were* in short supply. In 1940, of the 41,012 women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five in the territory about seventeen percent were White. The rest were local: Chinese, Hawaiian, Filipina and, most prominently, Japanese. Nisei women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five were nearly half of the youth population at 48 percent.¹⁰ If a servicemen was unwilling to forgo his prejudices, it was unlikely he would enjoy the company of a young woman while stationed in Hawai'i.

The imbalanced sex ratio created problems for all women. Servicemen were difficult to avoid and it was impossible to know whether they would respond to a friendly gesture with courtesy or hostility. Their attention might be flattering or threatening; women were groped while riding the busses and endlessly propositioned for a phone number, a date, even sex. Young women shared their knowledge with each other—how to tell the difference between a nice guy and a "wolf"; how to be friendly without leading a man on. Young women who were innocent or uninformed about sex suddenly needed to know how their bodies worked, and what the thousands of men who crowded the streets wanted from them. The Associated Women Students at the University of Hawai'i held lectures to address deficiencies in their knowledge. They learned everything from how to behave ("What Servicemen Like and Dislike about Honolulu Girls") to rudimentary biology ("Sexual Anatomy and Physiology"), knowledge they would

need to protect themselves.¹¹ The presence of so many men accelerated sexual awareness to the point that "... there is no more 'hush-hush' and ignorance about sex, except for a few isolated cases. Parents tell their children the 'facts of life' instead of delicately hinting about the 'birds and bees'; schools offer hygiene and family courses which are intended to illuminate any foggy or old-fashioned ideas."¹² Young women were placed in a difficult position of having to ward off certain types of sexual attention but tolerate or even invite others.

The circumstances were also challenging because prior to the war these young women had almost no substantial contact with local Haole who owned and managed the sugar plantations that employed most of the population. With the exception of schoolteachers, local children spent very little time in the company of Haole adults. Haole children who lived in plantation towns were usually sent to private schools after grammar school. In Honolulu, neighborhoods were for all intents and purposes racially segregated, as were the public schools. Reflecting on their experiences for a school assignment yielded almost uniform reactions: Haoles were sometimes admired for their social position and the material goods their wealth afforded them. They were held up as the embodiment of what it meant to be American, envied for their fluency in the English language. But they were also resented, even hated as standoffish and aloof. And there was a growing consciousness of racial discrimination by employers who were more likely to hire a White person from the continent even if a local person was equally if not more qualified for the job.

Local women also grew up in an atmosphere that created and continually reinforced the social distance between Haoles and the rest of the community. After years of being made to feel inferior to Whites and ashamed of their command of the English language, some women were reticent and self-conscious in the company of White servicemen. One young woman confessed that in her small town, her only social contact with Haoles was when they were honored guests at a party. Growing up, Haoles were "away and apart from us."¹³ When, during the war, she befriended a White serviceman, she confessed to being embarrassed to be seen in public with him, not because he was a soldier but because he was a Haole.

Although there was more than the average number of interracial marriages in Hawai'i before the war, the practice was not uniformly

embraced or accepted in every ethnic community. Interracial relationships that led to marriage were relatively rare in the Japanese community.¹⁴ Only the most liberal and open-minded parents welcomed non-Japanese into the family; children who married or even dated non-Japanese risked being ostracized from their community if not their families. Before the war, a Japanese woman who dated or married outside of her race risked public opprobrium: "She would be branded as a 'bad' girl. Her family, if at all concerned about her reputation and theirs, would object strenuously and when the girl ignored their opposition would have turned her out of the home."¹⁵

Objections to interracial relationships relaxed during the war in part because servicemen were so difficult to avoid. With so many men vying for their attention, young women overcame their reticence and learned to enjoy the attention and flattery. Some turned the situation to their advantage. Servicemen who had money but very little to spend it on, used it to entertain local women, taking them to the theatre or out to dinner. Women who came from conservative households gained a new sense of freedom and sexual autonomy. Reporting on the situation in Kona, a sociology student recorded the reactions to dating between local women and servicemen:

'No can help. Every place soldiers stop—inside theatre, skating rink, store, etc. even school teacher get soldier boy friend now.' Going out with a serviceman a year and a half ago used to arouse a host of comments among the Japanese people in the community but now it seems to be accepted as a common sight. . . . The attitude of the girls seem to be 'Everyone else is doing it. Why can't I?'¹⁶

In a study conducted for their sociology class, Dorothy Jim and Takiko Takaguchi found that "... the Oriental girl finds herself suddenly placed on a pedestal by the gallant American youth in search of feminine companionship. Consequently, she finds these men very attractive."¹⁷ White American men seemed exotic. They spoke fluent English and seemed sophisticated: "[T]he white boys are considerate of his date; he does little things that the ordinary Chinese boy does not . . . he helps the lady with her wraps while others just sit and watch. Does anyone blame a girl for wanting to go on dates with haole boys . . . ? I am positive a girl thrills to be treated like a queen."¹⁸

Women needed to balance their morals with the pressure to keep up

the morale of the troops. Since contact with servicemen was unavoidable they had to decide for themselves what that meant: being helpful and friendly in public, inviting a soldier to a family dinner, attending USO dances, casual friendships, dating in groups, or serious dating that might lead to marriage. Over time and with more experience, young women developed taxonomies to guide their decision-making. They learned to avoid “wolves” who were crude and unambiguous in their pursuit of sex. Unsophisticated poor or working class men from the continent were no better than local boys from the plantation. However, there were nice boys, young and innocent, whom they treated with kindness because they reminded them of their brothers who were also far from home. Men were also evaluated by military rank. War workers were anathema. Officers were much preferred to enlisted men. Some women developed preferences for one branch of the service over another. Others restricted their attention to men who seemed to have a prosperous future: pilots were a popular choice.¹⁹

Women’s sexual behavior was carefully policed. A woman who spent too much time with servicemen might be accused of prostitution. A girl on the arm of a soldier might be teased for targeting a serviceman for his money or as a potential mate and met with a chorus of taunts, “kamikaze” and “bakabomb.”²⁰ And when the inevitable happened, an unplanned pregnancy or a hasty marriage, the couple might be gossiped about or shunned. One young woman and her family faced scorn when she was impregnated by a White soldier. “In a very short while, the news had spread miles around and she was the center of gossip everywhere. Her parents were laughed at and her younger brother and sister were made fun of in school. The mothers in the neighborhood started to tell their children that [she] was a ‘bad girl’ and that they must not play anymore with members of [her] family.”²¹

“I EXPECTED THIS PLACE TO BE RACIALLY TOLERANT
BUT I HAVE FOUND IT TO BE OTHERWISE.”

Before World War II there was no Black community in Hawai‘i to speak of. African Americans who had migrated to Hawai‘i in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were quickly absorbed into the local population, marrying into Hawaiian, Filipino or Puerto Rican families.²² Black soldiers were likely to have been the first African

Americans local people had any close or sustained contact with. The first Black troops stationed in Hawai'i after annexation were members of the Twenty-Fifth Infantry Regiment, the "Buffalo Soldiers" who had fought in the Indian Wars and the Spanish American War. According to Miles Jackson, local government and business leaders attempted to dissuade the War Department from stationing Black troops in the territory. When they arrived in Hawai'i in 1913 they were met with some trepidation but local people quickly warmed to them. Local people turned out to see their baseball team that was accompanied by a jazz band that entertained the audience between innings. The troops also won praise for building the first trail to the summit of Mauna Loa.²³

The second group of Black servicemen in Hawai'i were members of the 369th Infantry Regiment, the storied "Harlem Hellfighters." During World War I, the US Army had relegated them to servile duties, but when they were detached to serve with the French Army, they earned France's highest military honor, the Croix de Guerre. They were celebrated with a parade up Fifth Avenue in New York City. A year later they and other African American servicemen battled racial terrorism during the Red Summer of 1919.²⁴ By the time they arrived in Hawai'i in 1942, the regiment had garnered a reputation for being tough and quick to respond to racial slights and bigotry by White servicemen. Hawai'i was outside the boundaries of traditional Jim Crow segregation so encounters between White and Black servicemen were often unpredictable. White soldiers, particularly southerners, were galled by the situation and often provoked fights by trying to enforce Jim Crow rules where they had never existed. Beth Bailey and David Farber described the tense encounters between Black and White servicemen this way:

The scene was often the densely packed sidewalks of the Hotel Street district...From a distance, the men would watch as a group of white sailors or soldiers sauntered down the sidewalks toward them. And then, right in their faces, there would be the words, the same words every time: 'Nigger, get off the street!' And when the black men did not move: 'Nigger, don't you know you're supposed to get off the street!'

The response was not acquiescence—when they were insulted, they fought back. "It didn't often take many punches, but he would make

sure the man went down—and hard. ‘We were raised in New York . . . We were not strangers to street fighting.’”²⁵

There was no question that the racial climate in Hawai‘i was somewhat warmer than what Black servicemen were accustomed to. However, anti-Black prejudice gradually became part of the racial landscape of Hawai‘i and Black servicemen experienced it in a number of ways. A café in Wahiawā was explicit, posting a “No Negroes Allowed” sign in the window.²⁶ Some bus drivers were observed skipping a stop where Black soldiers congregated, especially if the bus was already crowded with White servicemen.²⁷ Barbers were reluctant to wait on Black men because they assumed it would take longer to cut their hair, meaning that White servicemen might have to wait. After a local woman called attention to the fact that a Black soldier was not being waited upon in a store, he thanked her and said, “. . . this is the first time someone has been considerate to me. I came here yesterday too, but the White soldiers always came before me and I waited to get service for thirty-five minutes. I expected this place to be racially tolerant but I have found it to be otherwise.”²⁸

Local people tended to blame servicemen from the South for bringing anti-Black prejudice to Hawai‘i. But they did not need Southerners to introduce them to the stereotypes that were freely disseminated in films and minstrel shows that were as popular in Hawai‘i as they were anywhere else. They were familiar with the derogatory language used to refer to African Americans even if they were naïve as to its effect. One young local woman was publicly chastised in a movie theatre after a showing of the film *Cabin in the Sky*. She was reported to have said, “Gosh look at the niggers dance—they certainly can dance—they have rhythm.” She was confronted by a Black serviceman sitting nearby: “They are negroes and not niggers. Remember this well and don’t say [it] again.” The woman was embarrassed at having insulted the man but angry because he had the temerity to chastise her. “Gladys told me that she was so frightened that she could say nothing but later she was both sorry . . . but angry because she was corrected by a negro soldier. ‘I shouldn’t have said niggers but he had no right to correct me.’”²⁹

In addition to these spontaneous lessons in cultural sensitivity, Black servicemen sought to make a positive impression on the com-

munity. They performed in choirs, bands and sports competitions. Lieutenant John Woodruff (a 1936 Olympic gold-medalist and teammate of Jesse Owens) made a presentation to the University of Hawai'i Sociology Club, lecturing students on the problems African American soldiers were having. One soldier grew so frustrated after reading the sociology term paper of a University student that he wrote her an angry rebuttal. He accused her of repeating stereotypes, half truths, and rumors, and suggested that her knowledge of African Americans was woefully inadequate.

Back in the States, we have Judges, Magistrates, Policemen . . . representatives in nearly all City, State and Government Legislatures, including the Congress of the United States. Do you realize that we live in large and beautiful country homes, big modern apartment buildings and even mansions? . . . I do not mention these things as a 'braggart'. . . I am merely drawing a parallel between one group of Colored people . . . to another.³⁰

White servicemen were not shy about amplifying passive stereotypes into active bigotry by spreading rumors about African American treachery. One local Haole man asked a Southern soldier to explain his antipathy toward Blacks. He responded with one word: rape.³¹ White servicemen repeatedly told tales of Black violence and cautioned women to steer clear of Black men for their own safety. When a group of Black soldiers from the 369th Infantry Regiment arrived in Kahuku, they were treated with some curiosity but a great deal of suspicion. Gestures of friendship that might be acceptable from White servicemen were interpreted as aggressive: "If you attempt to speak to any of them, they'll be too friendly so instantly that we never try. . . . Once you talk to them, they always expect you to talk to them at any time and at any place."³²

Local people sometimes had to be reminded that their inaction could be interpreted as a sign of prejudice. University of Hawai'i students were asked to act as tour guides or hosts for any serviceman who came to campus. One Black soldier intended to act on the invitation but was not approached by any of the students "loafing away" in Hemenway Hall. "Not one was willing to forego this idle sporting for the fifteen minutes it might take to guide the Negro soldier around

the campus grounds.” They had to be prodded into action by a staff member; the observer concluded that “it was my guess that the main reason was a fear of being ‘seen’ with a Negro by their friends.”³³

Rumors about fights between Black and White servicemen reinforced the stereotype of Black men as uncontrollably violent. Stories spread quickly and were often exaggerated beyond belief. One informant described the aftermath of a fight that took place at a boxing match.

After the incident, every white sailor at the receiving station was issued several rounds of ammunition to protect himself from the negroes, and guards were placed all around the barracks. Later in the week, practically all of the negroes were taken up to some remote place and fenced in with marine guards watching who were told to shoot to kill.

The writer did not question the veracity of the story and seemed relieved that he provided her with a rationale for her attitude and behavior. “When I heard it, somehow I thought back to the times when I had to sit with them on the bus and how they annoyed me. Thus I was happy and relieved to know that I do not have to ride on the buses with them anymore.”³⁴

Most damaging was the image of Black men as sexual predators. White servicemen spread the stereotype by cautioning women to keep their guard up and to avoid being alone with them. Even sympathetic observers recoiled in horror at the thought of local women dating Black servicemen. When interviewed, one young man despaired for the future of democracy when he saw “. . . how some of the minority groups, like the Negroes, were being treated by the haoles. He insisted that the haoles should treat the Negro as an equal. Yet when asked how he felt about an Oriental girl going out with a Negro he replied, ‘Of all the people the girls have to choose. If she was my sister, I’d wring her pretty neck.’”³⁵

In any close contact between White and Black servicemen there was the potential for confrontation. The situation grew dangerous, however, when men competed for the attention of the few available women. These young women were eager to do their patriotic duty by entertaining servicemen, but they sometimes found themselves in the middle of the country’s on-going race war.

"DOING OUR DUTY"

The need to entertain members of the armed services was not new to the residents of O'ahu. Servicemen were another variety of tourist and a social, and economic infrastructure grew up to accommodate them. As Schofield Barracks expanded, merchants began to move to Wahiawā, opening restaurants, bars, barbershops, and dry cleaning stores near the base. Enlisted men crowded on to Hotel Street, the site of dozens of bars, nightclubs, and tattoo parlors. Officers who could afford more upscale entertainment frequented the nightclubs of Waikīkī. In 1917, the Army Navy YMCA (the former home of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel) opened at the corner of Hotel and Richard streets. Once the war began, it became the headquarters of the USO.

The USO was founded in 1941 as a public-private partnership between the US military and six private organizations—the YMCA, YWCA, National Catholic Community Service, National Jewish Welfare Board, the Salvation Army and the Army Navy YMCA.³⁶ They joined forces to provide facilities and social activities for members of the armed services around the country. The USO was a private charitable organization with only a few professional staff. Volunteers staffed the clubs and were responsible for coordinating, hosting, or sponsoring all the activities and entertainment. There were several USO Clubs on O'ahu including the largest and busiest, the USO Army and Navy Club that offered services, advice, and recreation for servicemen stationed in or passing through the territory. Smaller clubs, such as the USO Victory Club, and the Fort Street Club were more intimate and offered their own programs and events. The USO Victory Club specialized in "ethnic" programing, including Chinese New Years celebrations and, on one occasion, the Pacific Jubilee "in honor of Negro enlisted men" serving in the Pacific.³⁷ The celebration featured music, an "athletic weight lifting competition" and a screening of *The Negro Soldier*, part of the *Why We Fight* morale film series produced by Frank Capra.³⁸ There were also USO facilities and clubhouses in rural areas of O'ahu and at least one club on each of the neighbor islands. All told, there were fifty-one USO clubs in the territory during the war.³⁹

In addition to being an important and popular form of entertainment, dances were an alternative to the type of sexual recreation provided by prostitutes. Although there were always long lines outside the

brothels on Hotel Street, not all servicemen were interested in this type of sexual encounter. Servicemen who had wives or girlfriends, or who found prostitution morally objectionable, were grateful for a place that offered a wholesome atmosphere they would not be embarrassed to write home about. For the local women who served as their companions, dances were a safe and socially acceptable way to demonstrate their patriotism by helping to alleviate a soldier's boredom and loneliness. Some servicemen may have been hoping to capitalize on the situation by parlaying a dance into a date. However unlikely the prospect, dances and social events where single young women acted as hostesses always drew overflow crowds.

Young women planned and participated in dances for several reasons. The dances gave them a chance to have fun and meet new people, but they also saw it as part of the war effort, as their patriotic duty. They could do something that others could not: offer feminine companionship, something that seemed to normalize life in a war zone. They saw themselves as the embodiment of what the men were ostensibly fighting for: the preservation of everyday life in which men and women pursued their most basic needs—companionship and intimacy.

The women also interpreted their actions as reciprocity between themselves and the families of servicemen on the continent. Nisei women imagined that their brothers, training at Camp Shelby in Mississippi and Camp McCoy in Wisconsin, were as lonely as the soldiers in Hawai'i. Local boys far away from home would appreciate a girl who talked to them, danced with them, or offered them a home cooked meal. Some of their brothers did write home to report just such experiences, surprised and pleased that White families treated them kindly. The racial role reversal was not lost on them. One young woman said "[i]f my brother was in the army and the girls refused to go to the dances I would be angry."⁴⁰ Open, friendly relationships with White servicemen was a way for local Nisei women to express their gratitude to the open-minded Whites who welcomed their brothers into their homes.

Most dances ran smoothly. They were chaperoned by volunteers, and the police, Military Police, or Shore Patrol were on alert for any trouble. But there was always the potential for confrontation or violence. Alcohol was not allowed; servicemen who had been drinking

were asked to leave, but there was no way to keep them from drinking before they arrived at the party, or from sneaking a drink while they were there. Young women sometimes had to be recruited by the YMCA, a church group, or the University, in order to fill out the ranks so that as many men as possible had a chance to dance. Women were encouraged to dance with as many men as possible so that jealousy did not erupt into a fight. The sexual tension was palpable; women sometimes attended these affairs in groups or with friends to provide an extra layer of protection from any untoward behavior.

It was often difficult to hold social events for Black soldiers or those at which it was thought African American servicemen might attend. Women either refused to attend or were reluctant to dance with Black soldiers once they arrived. On at least one occasion, a USO event for Black servicemen was cancelled when University students failed to sign up. The women were chastised by one of the event organizers: "Mrs. Y. a haole woman on the university staff said that she would be very angry with her Mainland haole friends if they refused to go to the USO dance with the AJA's."⁴¹ University-based organizations also faced this dilemma. A Japanese American student reported that one campus organization planned to invite only "Oriental girls" to attend a dance for Black servicemen. "A few of us kicked until the policy was revised to include all girls together into one large group."⁴² When Black servicemen took it upon themselves to organize their own events, they were rebuffed. One group of Black soldiers went door to door, asking local people to come to an event they were hosting. With the exception of "a few Filipino girls," very few others attended.⁴³ Even in the place most celebrated for racial tolerance, social events for African Americans servicemen had the perhaps unintended consequences of being completely segregated affairs.

This humiliating treatment was the subject of a lecture by Lieutenant John Woodruff of the 369th Infantry Regiment, who told the members of the University of Hawai'i's Sociology Club that Black servicemen had grown tired of the lukewarm reception they received at USO events. Rather than attend an event where they might be ignored or made to feel uncomfortable, "[t]hey tell their superior officers to tear up their passes."⁴⁴ One servicemen lashed out and told a university student who reported on the treatment of African American servicemen in Kahuku:

When I first arrived here I pursued the fairer sex just as I used to do on the mainland. I soon found out that I was . . . “untouchable”, “had a tail”, “would kill at the drop of a hat” and “that my friendship was not desirable.” I quickly retreated and have not tried to advance since.

As a result of this treatment, he “cautioned fellows from my regiment from trying to become too friendly with the girls of the Islands.”⁴⁵

For local women, dancing with Black servicemen was a challenge, pitting their belief in democracy and racial tolerance against a visceral reaction to African American men. “I recall my first dance with a Negro. I wanted to refuse him, but my pride kept poking at me—‘Go on. You claim to have no race prejudice. You’ve said often enough that a Negro is as good as you are. Now’s your chance. Dance with him!’”⁴⁶ A student informant reported on a group of girls who refused to attend a dance for Black servicemen: “They make all sorts of excuses. It makes me sick because many of these girls squawk and squawk about how prejudiced other races are towards them, but when it comes to their being open minded, they fail themselves.”⁴⁷ Their behavior was, of course, hypocritical and a violation of Hawai‘i’s code of racial tolerance. Forced to make a split second decision, they were suddenly made aware of how much easier it was to profess a belief than it was to act upon it.

Some women confessed to being repulsed by the physical presence of Black men—their skin color, their size, their smell.⁴⁸ Recalling her experience dancing with a Black soldier, one woman thought more critically about the situation:

I must say that it gave me a funny feeling to see my hand in their pinkish hands. As I danced, I would catch myself observing their coal-black skin and their gleaming white teeth. Whether it was my imagination or not, I noticed that some of them emitted a peculiar odor which was different from the Chinese, Part-Hawaiian, or Haole ‘smells.’ However, I had to recognize the fact that maybe they thought Orientals smelled awfully queer also.⁴⁹

Dancing animated the most deep-seated fears of sexual contact with Black men. Relationships that went “too far” were beyond the pale. The result they feared, a Black child, was enough to keep them from entertaining the thought of a Black companion. “To be truthful, my girl friends . . . have one idea in common whenever Negroes are dis-

cussed. It has to do with Mendel's law of heredity. As one girl put it: 'I'd simply die if I married a man with even a drop of Negro blood. I wouldn't have any children, that's all.'"⁵⁰

Women were put in an uncomfortable position of having to choose between their ideals—to treat all the men as equally deserving of their attention—and their duty, to accept dances with as many men as possible. However, if she accepted a dance with a Black servicemen, she ran the risk of alienating the White servicemen who would not dance with her once she had been touched by a Black man. "I'm bound to hurt somebody's feelings, and I don't like it. I positively don't want to make any scene by refusing to dance with negroes. But then, if I do accept their dances, the white soldiers would hold a grudge against me for having done so."⁵¹ The fallout could be dangerous. At one dance a local woman refused a dance with an African American soldier:

He walked away disgusted when he overheard the girl accepting a dance from a White soldier. He walked right back to her and said "What's the matter? Why can't you dance with me if you can dance with him?" The White soldier stood up to protect the girl, and told the negro, "let her alone." Before long, there was a whole gang fight between the negroes and the whites. Coke bottle[s], and chairs were flying all around. Socks and blows were being exchanged. One White soldier was stabbed in the back . . . The fight was finally broken-up by the Police, and the dance was called off.⁵²

Local women were being put in a precarious position. They were being asked to sublimate their own racial antipathy and fear on the spot. As unreasonable as their prejudices were, they were required to overcome them in a particularly intimate way—in public and in the arms of a stranger. One young woman reflected on the dilemma as she listened to a minister give a sermon on tolerance, in which he subtly reprimanded the girls who did not do their duty and volunteer to dance with Black servicemen. "It's easy for him to be friendly with the Negro men because he's a man. But it isn't for the girls. I wonder if he realizes that."⁵³

"A COSMOPOLITAN CLUB"

Ultimately, the USO in Hawai'i chose to address some of these problems by providing a place that unambiguously welcomed Black ser-

vicemen. In the waning days of the war, the USO opened the Rainbow Club and hired Thomas Fairfax Johnson as the club's director. Addressing a Lion's Club luncheon, Johnson said, "If there is one place in the United States where an inter-racial USO program can really work, it's Hawaii."⁵⁴ The club was staffed by an interracial team and "... offered equal educational, [and] recreational [services] to service men and women of all races."⁵⁵ Although the USO was criticized for bowing to Jim Crow, Johnson did not see the Rainbow Club as segregated. The club was open to *all* and by inference *not* open to anyone who had a problem socializing with Black servicemen. The club appropriated the rainbow as a visual reinforcement of the values local people prized and the ideals servicemen were fighting for. The Rainbow Club gave local women a way to demonstrate their patriotism *and* their commitment to the local ethos of racial inclusion and offered African American servicemen what they had a right to expect: a warm reception and the opportunity to socialize in a safe and friendly atmosphere. That Hawai'i *needed* an inter-racial USO speaks to the difficulty local people had in maintaining Hawai'i's reputation as a racial utopia as it came under assault during the war. American racial habits challenged local people to consider the degree to which they had accepted key components of White supremacy: the innate superiority of Whites and the essential inferiority of Blacks.

The encounters between Black servicemen, White servicemen, and local women in wartime Hawai'i complicated the standard depiction of race relations in Hawai'i. The war introduced local people to African Americans and a more diverse group of Whites. Both groups challenged preconceived and sometimes simplistic notions about race, prejudice, and discrimination. The generation coming of age in the territorial era had been educated to believe that their ethnic background was no impediment to equal treatment in a democratic society. But when they were confronted with the embodiment of America's history of racism in the form of Black servicemen, they were forced to confront their own implicit biases. Local people were proud of Hawai'i's reputation as racially tolerant and accepting; local young women were obliged to enact these values in public, on the intimate space of the dance floor. This was difficult for everyone but the challenge for these women was formidable: confronting their own

prejudices, negotiating racial boundaries, and demonstrating their commitment to American democracy all at once.

The treatment of African American servicemen in Hawai'i forced local people to re-think the myth of racial harmony. Black servicemen arrived in Hawai'i only to be confronted with the reality—that the myth was just that and they could expect to be treated much the same as they would be in any other American community. It was little consolation that the situation was better than the South. Ministers, teachers, and newspaper columnists opined about the need for tolerance and equal treatment, but Black servicemen, local women, and White servicemen were involved in a complex set of racial and sexual negotiations in crowded movie theatres, busses, and on the dance floor.

White servicemen learned an equally complex set of lessons, coming to a place where, for the first time, they *were* White. Local women did not see them only as "men." Hawai'i's racial politics meant that their whiteness and maleness were inextricably linked in ways they could not understand. Although they were initially reluctant to socialize with women of color, they grew to tolerate and eventually enjoy their company. Local women were not necessarily marriage material—not the type of woman they would take home to their families—but they were young and beautiful and eager to offer cordial companionship, even if it was only out of a sense of patriotic duty. Any reluctance they might have felt melted away when they competed with Black men for the attention of these women. The same fear of racial contamination that caused White men to beat, terrorize, and murder Black men at even the suggestion of contact with White women was quickly transferred to the bodies of local women. White servicemen who refused to dance with a local woman after they danced with Black men demonstrated this fear of contamination. Only the rule of military authority and the exigencies of war kept White men from acting on those fears as they might have in Jim Crow America.

African American servicemen were painfully aware of how and why their presence was a source of trouble in White communities, but many were surprised and disappointed to find that Hawai'i was no exception. In an editorial, one servicemen described his surprise at being invited to a luncheon discussion at the Army Navy USO and congratulated the people of Hawai'i for living up to their values. After encouraging the residents of the territory to inoculate themselves

against stereotypes by educating themselves about African Americans, he issued this challenge: "I have learned that the people here are . . . loyal Americans. For this reason they should be treated as such. So should the Negro service men."⁵⁶

NOTES

- ¹ The Romanzo Adams Social Research Laboratory (RASRL) collection contains several types of materials including term papers, group research work, and data collected by faculty and graduate students beginning in the 1920s and ending in the 1970s. Romanzo Adams was the founding member of the sociology department and established the social research laboratory to collect and retain research and information on race in Hawai'i. During World War II, members of the department participated in the study of morale in the war zone and, with the help of their students, began to record their observations. The papers herein are referred to as "Student Journals (SJ)" and are cited by using a code associated with each individual writer ("USHf"). Each paper was numbered sequentially and each folder contains a set of papers arranged numerically. For example, UHSf-630-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 25, Papers 626–644, Aug 1942) means that paper 630 is in a folder containing all the papers numbered from 625–644. No authors' names are used. Titles and dates are included when available. Some work is organized by the name of the faculty member who taught the class or collected the material. In this paper, work from the Bernhard Hormann Student Papers (BHSP) is cited as follows: Author Initials, "Paper Title" RASRL BHSP (Box number, Folder number).
- ² Andrew W. Lind, *Hawaii's People* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1967), 71.
- ³ Gwenfread Allen, *Hawaii's War Years 1941–1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1950), 219.
- ⁴ For a more detailed accounting, see Chapter 13 of *Hawaii's War Years*, "The Troops Take Over."
- ⁵ UHSj-490-I, "The Serviceman's Conception of the Haoles in Hawaii and How They Influence the Rural Residents," RASRL SJ (Folder 18, 481–490, 1944).
- ⁶ UHSj-259a-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 5, 255–274, July/August 1944).
- ⁷ P.H., "The Development of Civil vs. Military Conflict in Hawaii," RASRL BHSP (Box 9, Folder 9).
- ⁸ J. B., "Civilian-Serviceman Clashes in Honolulu," RASRL BHSP (Box 9, Folder 7).
- ⁹ "A Pocket Guide to Hawaii," (Washington, D.C.: US Army Information Branch, 1944), 7–8.
- ¹⁰ Figures based on Table 4.3 in Eleanor C. Nordyke, *The Peopling of Hawai'i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989), 228, and Table 1.11 in Robert C. Schmitt, *Historical Statistics of Hawaii* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawai'i, 1977), 22.

- ¹¹ "Group Counseling Service for University Women," University of Hawaii President's Report, 1942-43, 43-44.
- ¹² W.G., "Courtship and Dating," RASRL BHSP (Box 3, Folder 10, 1947).
- ¹³ UHSj-350-I, "Interracial Dating," RASRL SJ (Folder 9, Papers 339-355, Spring 1943).
- ¹⁴ Between 1930-1934, 95 percent of Japanese men and women married another Japanese person. Seventy-one percent of Portuguese married a Portuguese person. Sixty-one percent of White men and women married another White person. Only 25 percent of Hawaiians married another Hawaiian. This is due in part to the larger number of marriage partners in the Japanese American community. But Japanese parents frowned on—sometimes even prohibited—interracial marriages, especially for their daughters. Data derived from Romanzo Adams, *Interracial Marriage in Hawaii: A Study of the Mutually Conditioned Processes of Acculturation and Amalgamation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937), 340.
- ¹⁵ UHSj-339-I, "Inter-racial Dating by a Japanese Girl," RASRL SJ (Folder 9, Papers 339-355, Spring, 1943).
- ¹⁶ UHSj-442-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 15, Papers 439-444, 1942).
- ¹⁷ Dorothy Jin and Takiko Takiguchi, "Attitudes on Dating of Oriental Girls with Service Men," *Social Process in Hawai'i*, Volume VIII (1943): 67.
- ¹⁸ UHSc-357-I, "Interracial Dating," RASRL SJ (Folder 10, Papers 356-377, 1943).
- ¹⁹ UHShl-278-I, "Accommodation of the Mainland Defense Worker to Stable Local Groups and Service Groups," RASRL SJ (Folder 6, Papers 275-294, 1943).
- ²⁰ "Baka" means "fool" or "foolish" in Japanese. Japanese pilots on kamakaze missions flew planes equipped with a special missile that allied troops nicknamed "baka bombs." The implication was that the woman was on a suicide mission and her date was the target.
- ²¹ UHSj-462-I, "Gossip in the Neighborhood," RASRL SJ (Folder 16, Papers 445-463, n.d.).
- ²² According to the census, there were only 232 African Americans in Hawai'i in 1940 and did not exceed 1,000 until after the war. See Table 1.12, Robert Schmitt, *Historical Statistics of Hawaii*, 25.
- ²³ See Miles Jackson, "A Different Drummer: African Americans in the Military in Hawai'i," *Social Process in Hawai'i*, Volume 43 (2004).
- ²⁴ Between May and October 1919, racial violence broke out in cities across the United States including Washington D.C.; Chicago, Illinois; Omaha, Nebraska; Charleston, South Carolina; Norfolk, Virginia; Knoxville, Tennessee; Austin, Texas; and Elaine, Arkansas. Whites were provoked to violence for many reasons including strikes, labor unrest, and violations of Jim Crow protocols, but White mobs were often provoked by the presence of African American servicemen, veterans of World War I, who attempted to protect Black communities. A recent review of the events of the Red Summer can be found in Cameron McWhirter's, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2012).

- ²⁵ Beth Bailey and David Farber, *The First Strange Place: Race and Sex in World War II Hawaii* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 152.
- ²⁶ UHSf-630-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 25, Papers 626–644, Aug 1942). These incidents were not confined to Honolulu. In Hilo, a Black serviceman asked before he sat down if the restaurant would serve him. “Later on the Negro told the waiter that he did not want to go into any restaurant and then be ‘kicked’ out. He said that there are many eating places where the colored men are not served and he felt that he should ask before he sat down, instead of being embarrassed later on.” UHSj-478-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 17, Papers 464–480, 1944).
- ²⁷ UHShl-499, “Pertinent and Impertinent Observations on the Congregate Appearance of the Negro in Hawai‘i,” RASRL SJ (Folder 19, Papers 491–499, n.d.).
- ²⁸ UHSj-429-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 13, Papers 414–432, December 9, 1943).
- ²⁹ UHSj-334-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 8, Papers 315–335, 1944).
- ³⁰ The letter was written by George W. Sebastian, a private in the 369th Regiment. It was filed along with the student’s observation journal and term paper. In RASRL SJ Folder 14, Papers 433–439 see: UHSj-438-I, “Observation Journal,” November 1943–January 1944; UHSj-438a-I, “The Negro Soldier at Kahuku,” February 9, 1944; and UHSj-438b-I, “Dear Miss Amyl,” March 10, 1944. The paper was edited and published as, “The Negro Soldier in Kahuku,” *Social Process in Hawai‘i*, Volume IX–X (July 1945), 28–32.
- ³¹ UHShl-469-I, “Negroes in Hawaii,” RASRL SJ (Folder 17, Papers 464–480, May 18, 1944).
- ³² UHSj-438a-I, “The Negro Soldier at Kahuku,” RASRL SJ (Folder 14, Papers 433–438, February 9, 1944).
- ³³ UHShl-488-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 18, Papers 481–490, 1944).
- ³⁴ UHSj-286a, RASRL SJ (Folder 6, Papers 275–294, 1943). Fights occasionally degenerated into brawls that required intervention by the MPs or Shore Patrol. It seems unlikely that Marine guards were given license to kill their fellow servicemen but the students were asked to record rumors and hearsay without attempting to verify the facts.
- ³⁵ UHSj-465-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 17, Papers 464–480, 1944).
- ³⁶ In other locales, the Traveler’s Aid Society was the sixth organization that comprised the USO. However, the organization did not exist in Hawai‘i. See Gwenfread Allen, *Hawaii’s War Years*, 251.
- ³⁷ “Negro Service members are Honored in Pacific Jubilee at USO Victory Club,” *HSB*, August 28, 1944, 6.
- ³⁸ Thomas Cripps and David Culbert, “The Negro Soldier (1944): Film Propaganda in Black and White,” *American Quarterly* 31:5 (Winter 1979): 616–640.
- ³⁹ Gwenfread Allen, *Hawaii’s War Years*, 252.
- ⁴⁰ Dorothy Jim and Takiko Takiguchi, “Attitudes on Dating of Oriental Girls with Service Men,” *Social Process in Hawai‘i*, Volume VIII (1943): 70. Nisei soldiers training on the continent faced a similar situation with the racial roles reversed. Rather than ask White women to entertain Japanese soldiers, the USO turned to Japanese American women interned at the Rohwer Relocation Center in

Arkansas to act as companions. See John Howard, *Concentration Camps on the Home Front: Japanese Americans in the House of Jim Crow* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

- ⁴¹ UHShl-325-I, "The Effect of the War on Race Relations," RASRL SJ (Folder 8, Papers 315-338, 1943).
- ⁴² UHSj-489-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 19, Papers 481-490, 1944).
- ⁴³ UHSj-490-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 19, Papers 481-490, 1944). During the war, negative attitudes toward Filipinos competed with prejudice against African Americans. One young woman was overheard saying, "I'd rather marry a Filipino or even a Puerto Rican—anyone but a Negro. That's where I draw the line." UHSc-466-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 17, Papers 464-480, 1944).
- ⁴⁴ UHSc-449-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 16, Papers 445-463, 1942).
- ⁴⁵ George Sebastian "Dear Miss Atmyl," March 10, 1944, RASRL SJ (Folder 14, Papers 433-439).
- ⁴⁶ UHSj-490-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 19, Papers 481-490).
- ⁴⁷ UHSj-477a-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 17, Papers 464-480, 1944).
- ⁴⁸ One soldier responded in kind. After hearing that local women thought Black soldiers had a "peculiar odor," he wrote: "I can assure that while dancing with one of the 'sweet young things' the odor emanating from her body FAILED TO ENTHRALL." UHSj-George Sebastian, "Dear Miss Atmyl," RASRL SJ (Folder 14, Papers 433-439, March 10, 1944).
- ⁴⁹ UHSc-277a-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 5, Papers 254-277, 1944).
- ⁵⁰ UHSc-491-I, RASRL SJ (Folder 19, Papers 491-499, 1944).
- ⁵¹ UHSj-438a-I, "The Negro Soldier at Kahuku," RASRL SJ (Folder 14, Papers 433-438, February 9, 1944).
- ⁵² UHSj-438a-I, "The Negro Soldier at Kahuku," RASRL SJ (Folder 14, Papers 433-438, February 9, 1944).
- ⁵³ Andrew Lind, "A Typical Day in the War Research Laboratory." *Social Process in Hawai'i*, Volume IX-X (1945): 89.
- ⁵⁴ "USO Inter-racial Club Praised by Speaker," *HA*, June 6, 1945, 2.
- ⁵⁵ "USO Rainbow Club Open House June 7," *HA*, June 4, 1945, 2.
- ⁵⁶ Sargent Joseph W. Fields, "Treatment of Negro Soldiers," *HA*, March 6, 1943, 12.