

LITERARY STUDIES  
EAST AND WEST

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**Constructions and Confrontations:  
Changing Representations of  
Women and Feminisms,  
East and West**

Selected Essays

Volume 12

Edited by  
Cristina Bacchilega  
Cornelia N. Moore



University of Hawai'i



East-West Center

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Volume 12  
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## Constructions and Confrontations: Changing Representations of Women and Feminisms, East and West

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College of Languages, Linguistics and Literature  
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## The Women of Edward Sakamoto's Trilogy: *Hawai'i No Ka 'Oi*

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Edward Sakamoto's trilogy entitled *Hawai'i No Ka 'Oi* consists of three plays: *A Taste of Kona Coffee*, *Mānoa Valley*, and *The Life of the Land*. Although *A Taste of Kona Coffee* is sequentially the first play of the trilogy, it was actually the last to be written. It premiered in September 1993 with Kumu Kahua Theatre, a Honolulu-based theatre group that is well known for bringing local plays and spoken Pidgin to the stage. *Mānoa Valley* was first produced by The University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Department of Theatre and Dance at Kennedy Theatre in 1982, and because of its immense popularity it was successfully revived by Kumu Kahua Theatre in 1989 and again in 1993. Kumu Kahua Theatre premiered *The Life Of The Land* in 1985, and revived it in 1994 when the three plays were presented together.

As a trilogy, these plays show three generations of a local Japanese family in Hawai'i. Although the women characters are not central to the plots, they are important to the action of the plays and, because the trilogy covers such a long span of time, it is interesting to note how the roles of the women differ with each historical period. The plays, set in 1929, 1959, and 1980, show the changing roles of women in society as reflected within this particular family. The women in these plays are unquestionably strong, but the type of strength required by the women changes with each play, depending upon the time period in which it is set.

*A Taste of Kona Coffee* takes place on a Kona coffee farm on the Big Island of Hawai'i. The play depicts the struggles of an Issei, or first generation Japanese immigrant, family as Kazuo Kamiya, the father, has become too old to work the farm any longer and the two sons want to give up the farm and live in Honolulu. Mikame Kamiya is Kazuo's steadfast wife. Throughout the play Mikame, in her quiet and unassuming manner, goes about her work caring for Kazuo and managing the home. When Aki returns for a visit from Honolulu he and Mikame discuss the difficulties they are facing, and Aki expresses his appreciation for the work his mother does:

- Mikame: He'll be better by then. Everything will be all right.  
Aki: I hope so, for your sake. Otosan is very demanding. Toshio said it's real hard on you.  
Mikame: It's a wife's duty to take care of her husband when he's sick. It's no hardship.  
Aki: When I get married, I hope I find a wife just like you, Okasan. Time for me to get married, I think.  
Mikame: What about the women in Honolulu? No good ones?

- Aki: Not good like you, Okasan. You know there's an American song that's very popular (sings), "I want a girl just like the girl, that married dear old Dad." You understand?  
Mikame: Just find a wife who's not afraid of hard work. (11)

When Mikame says, "Just find a wife who's not afraid of hard work," she sums up the strength that is valued most in the women of this play, which is the ability to work hard without complaining. Mikame represents the quiet, nurturing, steadfast strength of the women of her generation.

Tomiko is a young neighbor woman who emulates the hard-working, steadfast strength of Mikame. Tomiko helps with the maintenance of the Kamiya household and becomes so indispensable that at the conclusion of the play when the Kamiya family is preparing to relocate to Honolulu, it is with the understanding that Tomiko will come along to help care for Kazuo.

Tomiko's character carries over into the second play of the trilogy, *Mānoa Valley*, where her name is shortened to Tomi. In this play, we learn that Aki and Tomi eventually married and had a son named Nobu. Tomi, Aki, Aki's brother Tosh, and Tosh's wife Fumiko are now the senior generation, and the play focuses on the struggles of the members of the younger generation to establish their own identities.

One of the things *Mānoa Valley* does is to show Japanese women going beyond the role of "housewife," and establishing identities within the work force. When we think of the 1950's in America, we think of a time when the wife and mother stayed home to clean house and raise children while her husband went to work to support the family. Culturally, Japanese women have especially been characterized as being subservient to their men. This was illustrated by the women in *A Taste of Kona Coffee* who devoted their lives to caring for their homes, their men, and their children. This attitude is carried over, to some extent, in *Mānoa Valley*. An early example of this is where Spencer, nineteen years old, wakes up late and expects his mother to stop what she is doing and cook breakfast for him:

- Spencer: Mama, where my breakfast?  
Fumiko: You neboske, tell your sista cook for you.  
Spencer: You like she poison me or wat?  
Debbie: Yeah, no give me ideas. (5)

Because Fumiko is busy she cannot cook Spencer's breakfast for him. But instead of telling him to cook his own breakfast, Fumiko responds by telling him to ask his younger sister Debbie to cook for him. Debbie is not surprised by the idea that she should cook for her brother simply because she is female. Perhaps being of the older generation, Fumiko upholds the tradition of female subservience without really thinking about it. Debbie, who is only thirteen years old and still living at home, doesn't think to question such an expectation.

In this scene it seems that the playwright is reinforcing the traditional representation of women playing culturally subscribed roles. But in a later scene

we see Laura, the older daughter who has a college education and has lived on her own, calling such traditional expectations into question:

- Fumiko: Toku, you ate breakfast yet?  
 Toku: Yeah, I cook my own today.  
 Laura: He cook his breakfast every morning now, Mama. I get him trained real good.  
 Fumiko: Shame on you. You neva used to be lazy like dat before.  
 Toku: Nah, 's okay. I used to already.  
 Fumiko: For what you wen' study home economics at UH?  
 Laura: No ask me. I was tinkin maybe I going back to school and take some courses.  
 Tosh: Nemmine dat. You gotta raise kids firs'. Yeah, Mama. Den you can send your kids to college.  
 Laura: I get enough wit' one big kid here. (18)

Both Tosh and Fumiko urge Laura to conform to the traditional expectations of a Japanese woman's behavior, but Laura has other goals in mind for herself. Laura's husband Toku does not seem to mind that Laura does not fit the role of the traditional Japanese wife, perhaps because he is not the traditional Japanese husband. Toku is unambitious in terms of career goals and financial "success." Perhaps because Toku is unaggressive in his approach toward life, he is willing to undertake the household duties and he supports Laura's need to step out of the traditional Japanese female role and approach life in a more aggressive way.

When Tosh learns that Spencer wants to go away to the mainland, he is at a loss for what to do about his business. He had always planned on Spencer taking over the company because Spencer is his only son. Laura suggests her husband Toku as a possible candidate for the job, but Tosh and Toku both object to this, knowing that Toku would not be able to handle the pressure when things got tough. So Laura takes a bold step and suggests herself for the job:

- Laura: Then I can be the boss.  
 Tosh: You? No be silly.  
 Laura: Why? I can tell the guys what to do.  
 Tosh: No. Wahine boss no good, make da boys feel funny. Mo' betta you start raising kids, how long Mama waiting for grandchildren. (52, 53)

Laura is hurt by her father's rejection and at the end of the play when he changes his mind and asks her to work with him so she can take over the company, she responds with indifference and hostility. But Fumiko assures her husband, "You can depend on her (61)," reaffirming the quiet strength of their daughter.

Because Fumiko is of the older generation she might appear to be more subservient in behavior than the younger women, but her strength is shown in a different way. All the members of her family communicate through her. At the beginning of the play when Spencer is afraid to tell Tosh about his wish to go to the mainland, he appeals to his mother to talk to his father for him:

- Spencer: I gotta be my own boss.  
 Fumiko: Baka. I no like hear da kine stupid talk. No hurt Daddy for nuttin'.  
 Spencer: I know. 'S why I tought maybe you can tell him. (12)

At the end of the play, Fumiko is pleasantly surprised that she hasn't had to use her powers of persuasion to convince her husband to let Spencer study on the mainland. She questions Tosh, "How come you wen' change your mind? I neva even have to talk to you (61)."

Young Debbie's strength lies in her uninhibited nature and her spunk, evident in her lively banter throughout the play. Her conversation with Tosh and Aki near the end of the play illustrates the height of her dreams:

- Debbie: Daddy, I know you no like me take ova your company, so I jus' made up my mind wat I going be.  
 Tosh: Wat?  
 Debbie: Da first woman governor of Hawaii.  
 Aki: Ooohhh, 's big talk from one little girl.  
 Debbie: 'S one promise. (She spits in her left palm and slaps it with her right.)  
 Tosh: One Kamiya promise, eh. Okay, I believe you.  
 Debbie: And I not getting married either.  
 Tosh: Huh?  
 Debbie: So I can keep da family name. Dabaney Masako Kamiya, governor of Hawaii, da fiftieth state in da United States of America.  
 Aki: Ooohh, you so strong, you make me scared.  
 Debbie: 'S da Kamiya blood, Uncle. Strong like-a hell. (54)

It may sound like Debbie's father and uncle are just patronizing a little girl in this scene, but during a private conversation between just the two of them, they share their admiration for the strength of the women in their family:

- Aki: But Mama was strong. Even wen tings used to get bad in Kona, she neva cry, she neva complain. Yeah, all da Kamiya wahines tough inside. Jus' like Fumiko.  
 Tosh: Well, Tomi too.  
 Aki: Tomi? I tell you, she get one mean mou'. But inside she soft. Wen Nobu told us he going find his own place wit' Susan, Tomi ack like she no care. But dat night she wen' cry in da bedroom. But she neva let Nobu know how she feel. (58)

Clues to what characters are like are found not only in what those characters say and do, but also in what other characters say about them. The admiration of the two old men in this scene shows that, in their opinion, the women in their family are both loving and strong.

The final play of Edward Sakamoto's trilogy, *The Life of the Land*, shows how the Kamiya family has had to adjust and cope with the developments brought on by decisions made a generation before. Fumiko and Aki are the only

members of the older generation who are still alive, and they reflect on the changes that have occurred.

Laura is a hard working business woman, who despite her best efforts, is forced to sell her business due to difficult economic circumstances. Little Debbie is now divorced and works as a journalistic photographer. Finding their rewards in career rather than family, neither woman has had any children. Their only cousin, Nobu, married a *Haole*, or Caucasian, woman from the mainland who managed to combine career and family by having one son and working as an English teacher while helping her husband in his efforts to run for political office. Spencer never married and has no children.

When Spencer returns from the mainland after being away for twenty years and discovers that Laura is selling their father's business, he blames her and makes her question her worth as a business woman:

- Laura: Maybe Spenca could've done betta.  
 Debbie: No, not Spenca. He would've been bad, because his heart wouldn't have been in it. I bet he would say da same ting. You did good, Laura, nobody could've done betta. (59)

While Debbie reaffirms Laura's worth, Fumiko blames herself for the demise of the business:

- Fumiko: Da business gone. Me good for nuttin', 's why. No mo' head. I neva can help you.  
 Laura: No, Mama, not dat.  
 Fumiko: Wen Daddy firs' started da business, I told him, "Let me go to da office, I can do something." But he always said, "You stay home, take care da kids." I wish I wen' force him to let me help. I wish . . . but I'm so stupid, wat I can do?  
 Laura: No say dat, please. You wen' help plenty. Wit'out you, Daddy couldn't do anyting. Because you wen' work so hard at home, Daddy could concentrate on da business side.  
 Debbie: 'S right, Mama. Da work you did at home was so important. You raised us. We were so lucky. (58, 59)

This scene illustrates a central conflict in the lives of women playing culturally enforced roles during this time period. As Fumiko expresses it, she has been told by society and her family that she should stay home and take care of the children, and this has given her a subconscious feeling that she was not good enough, or smart enough, to do anything else. It takes her two grown daughters, who *have* been able to establish themselves in careers of their choice, to make Fumiko see that the work she did was of immense value, even if it is only recognized by the three of them.

In reviewing Edward Sakamoto's trilogy, we find that the strength of the women of the Kamiya family does change from generation to generation depending upon the needs of the time and the restraints of society. In 1929 on the Kona coffee farm Mikame showed her strength by offering steadfast support

for her *man* and a nurturing presence for her *children*. In 1959 Fumiko showed her strength by being the glue which held the family together, while the younger women of the family broke out of the traditional molds and forged new, independent identities for themselves. While the women of the older generation nurtured their *husbands* and *children*, these younger women recognized the importance of nurturing *themselves*. In the third play, the women have proven themselves in the world outside the home, and have the battle scars to show for it. As they reflect on the changes they have been through, the women nurture *one another* and reaffirm the strength each has, not just at work or at home, but in both worlds.

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LITERARY STUDIES: EAST AND WEST

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The present volume, *Constructions and Confrontations: Changing Representations of Women and Feminisms, East and West* continues a series entitled *Literary Studies: East and West*, published by the College of Languages, Linguistics and Literature, University of Hawaii. This volume, as well as others in this series, is part of ongoing research projects jointly sponsored by the College of Languages, Linguistics and Literature and the East-West Center. The series endeavors to address the compelling need for greater cultural awareness and sensitivity through a focused study of selected aspects of literature. More specifically the research and allied conferences have sought to address the identifications of commonalities and differences in topos and methodology, the changing values over time, and the perception of the portrayal of the self in different cultures. The East-West context provides a unique setting and pioneering opportunities on an international scale.

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