



REMEMBERING IOSEPA

*History, Place, and Religion
in the American West*

MATTHEW KESTER

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Matt Kester
Ka'a'awa, Hawai'i

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Remembering Iosepa

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Introduction

Connections

It was mid-November in Salt Lake City, and the cloudless, midday sky shone bright blue. Clear skies in November on the Wasatch Front mean cold, and it was freezing. I was in Salt Lake City doing research and staying at a hotel near the University of Utah and had arranged for the hotel shuttle to drop me off at the university library. A few moments later a white van with the hotel logo on it pulled up. I hopped in and thanked the driver for the ride. “No problem,” he replied. “Where are you visiting from?” “Hawai’i,” I told him. “I am here doing some work.” “Hawai’i, huh?” he replied. “Where in Hawai’i?” “On O’ahu,” I said, “the northeastern side, a little town called Lā’ie.” “Lā’ie? Oh, I have family there!” I asked him what his family’s name was. He told me; I knew two of his uncles quite well. He was Tongan, born and raised in West Salt Lake City. Our brief conversation turned to the subject of Hawaiian high school football, which was how I was acquainted with one of his uncles. It was something we were both clearly passionate about. The local Hawaiian team from my area, Kahuku High School, had traveled to Utah earlier in the season to play an exhibition game with one of Salt Lake City’s better teams, from Highland High School. Kahuku had lost, a disappointment to us both. “After that loss,” the driver told me, “I scraped all the Kahuku stickers off my car and didn’t wear my Red Raiders shirts or sweatshirts for a while. I just didn’t want to hear it. All of us Polys were pissed off.” It was a short ride to the library; we caught each other’s names, I thanked him for the ride, and we said good-bye. He gave me a card with the hotel phone number on it to call if I needed a shuttle ride back. I spent the rest of the afternoon poring over the records of the Iosepa Agricultural and Stock Company.

I looked out the fifth floor window of the library. It was now dusk. Probably a lot colder too, I thought. I found the hotel shuttle card and called to request a pickup, then walked outside and waited. The view from the base of the Wasatch Range into the valley below in the twilight was beautiful, even with temperatures in the low twenties. After about fifteen minutes the shuttle arrived, with a different driver at the wheel. I said hello and thanked the young man for picking me up. “Where are you from?” he asked. I told him. “Wow,” he replied, “that must be nice.” He said he had lived in Utah all of his life. The driver of the earlier shuttle was his cousin.

Walking into the hotel lobby, I noticed a sea of red shirts and large people. The hotel was hosting the University of Utah football team for a pregame banquet. They were going to play New Mexico the next evening, and I had tickets. Walking through the throng of players, I saw a familiar face. I called his name, and he looked over and smiled when he saw me. Our families are next-door neighbors in Hawai‘i, although he had been away at school since we moved in. We shook hands and talked a bit, then I wished him luck and told him I would tell his family hello, of course.

In the space of about six hours, I had bumped into three people connected with the community I call home. One of them shares this home with me, and the other two have a vague but palpable connection to my community. They have made it *their* community, too. Because I am in Utah, none of this seems odd at all, even though I am three thousand miles away from home. If I were staying in West Valley, I would no doubt run into many more people I knew from home. West Valley is where most of the Polynesians live; everybody knows that.

“About two thousand years ago—perhaps three hundred years more or three hundred years less—there occurred the most remarkable voyage of discovery and settlement in all human history.” This passage refers to the voyages of Oceanian discoverers into the sea of islands that is the Pacific Ocean, the voyages that peopled all of Oceania. What makes these travels so remarkable is their deliberateness. The voyaging canoe, or *va’a*, made them possible. The *va’a* is a remarkable and ingenious piece of technology. At the same time that continental peoples on the other side of the earth were tentatively venturing out of sight of dry land, these Oceanian voyagers traversed the largest geographic feature on the planet on deliberate and calculated settlement expeditions. The success of the first fantastic journey was as much a matter of belief as it was of skill. People do not sail willingly to their deaths. If these voyagers did not believe it could be done, the voyage would never have been attempted. The fact that it *had* been done, and the knowledge of *how* it had been done, fostered in them a belief that it could be done again. As Greg Denning, the author of the quote above, also stated, these

voyages, and the tools that made them possible, were the product of “the cultural DNA of two millennia through all the Pacific.”¹ Perhaps the only question on the minds of these voyagers was not whether there were more islands awaiting them, but how many there were. What were the borders of this seemingly boundless realm? Were there more islands, populated by strangers? Such questions must have animated the ambitions of countless Oceanian voyagers.

Sometime between approximately 1830 and 1850, a Native Hawaiian named Richard Mahoui decided to board a foreign ship bound for foreign shores. Like those of the Oceanian voyagers two millennia before him, we can only guess at his motives. The world that informed his decision, the Hawaiian Islands of the early nineteenth century, is more familiar to us. It is unlikely he was a voyager against his will, but his choice to make the journey might have been made at the behest of kin or a chief. Still, he could as easily have made the decision to satisfy his own wanderlust, to act on the prompting of a dream, or maybe just to follow a hunch: the nagging feeling that this was an opportunity not to be missed. We cannot know whether this was a permanent move, or if he left on a journey with a specified route or duration, or with the assurance that he could return home if he so desired. But we know he left. Like the voyagers who departed scores of other islands in search of a new home, he left a record of his travels, an imprint in time testifying about his journey. Richard Mahoui appears in 1850 records in Washington State, one of at least twenty-five Native Hawaiians (listed in the census records as “Sandwich Islanders”) residing in Clark County. He lived in the “Kanaka Village” at Fort Vancouver. Mahoui didn’t have to build his own *va’a*. A ship came to him, built and sailed by *Haole* (white foreigners). He climbed aboard, and his journey began. In the years that followed, hundreds of Native Hawaiians left their homes as sojourners and settlers.² Although many eventually returned to Hawai’i, the vast majority of those who stayed settled in western North America. The focus of this book is a small minority of those Native Hawaiian settlers: the nineteenth-century Mormon colonists in Utah, who were drawn east by the dictates of their new religion. Their history, like the history of Native Hawaiian settlers in the Pacific Northwest or the Sierra Nevada foothills, is an often overlooked part of Hawai’i’s story.

The story of these Native Hawaiian settlers is also an integral part of the history of western North America, and telling it provides an opportunity to bring these histories together. By acknowledging the importance of these histories for both Hawai’i and the American West, we recognize the interconnectedness of the regional histories in and around Oceania in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By emphasizing the ideological

(in this case religious) motivations that create and sustain diasporic communities globally, we acknowledge the variety of factors that motivate human action and the agency of individuals in the context of the larger structures that shape their lives. By stressing the importance of place for those whom we so often see as displaced, we demonstrate the centrality of communities in shaping their own histories. For a variety of reasons, Native Hawaiians have been settling in western North America since the early nineteenth century. In the twenty-first century they have been joined by other Pacific Islanders, creating a transnational diaspora that connects islands and continents. I argue for continuity between these seemingly different stories that span two very different eras.

This recent growth in a complex and transnational “Pacific diaspora” that spans Oceania from Sydney to Anchorage has been the subject of a prodigious amount of scholarship. Scholars from various disciplines have estimated its effects and mapped its relationships across borders and boundaries; they have lamented “brain drains” and the reliance of home nations on the money that their family members remit; and they have explored the root causes and disparate effects of this diaspora on families, individuals, nations, and cultures. Although much of this scholarship has focused on the negative or deleterious effects of this movement across the Pacific,³ recently there have been efforts to rethink this dispersion in the context of the broader history and culture of Oceania. This shift in thinking began with the 1993 publication of Epeli Hau’ofa’s groundbreaking essay “Our Sea of Islands,” an instant classic that generated an academic upheaval of such magnitude that it is fair to think of Pacific Islands’ scholarship in terms of pre- and post- “Our Sea of Islands.” In this essay Hau’ofa narrates his own epiphany, a new paradigm in thinking about Oceanian cultures, communities, and economies:

Smallness is a state of mind. There is a gulf of difference between viewing the Pacific as ‘islands in a far sea’ and as ‘a sea of islands.’ The first emphasizes dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centers of power. When you focus this way you stress the smallness and remoteness of islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships. . . . [I]t was continental men, Europeans and Americans, who drew imaginary lines across the sea, making the colonial boundaries that, for the first time, confined ocean peoples to tiny spaces. . . . The difference between the two perspectives is reflected in the first two terms used for our region: Pacific Islands and Oceania. The first term, ‘Pacific Islands,’ is the prevailing one used everywhere; it connotes small areas of land surfaces sitting atop submerged reefs or sea-mounts. . . . “Oceania” connotes a sea of islands with their inhabitants. The world

of our ancestors was a large sea full of places to explore, to make their homes in, to breed generations of seafarers like themselves.... The world of Oceania may no longer include the heavens and the underworld; but it certainly encompasses the great cities in Australia, New Zealand, the USA, and Canada. And it is within that expanded world that the extent of the people's resources must be measured.⁴

Immediately the past, present, and future movement of Pacific Islanders across Oceania was conceptualized in new ways. Gone were the notions of isolation and smallness, and the economic models that emphasized relationships between "core" and "peripheral" nations. Hau'ofa offered a new vision of Oceania that was as radical and revolutionary in its ideology as it was humble and self-effacing in its presentation. Although Hau'ofa's theoretical model is still challenged by some in its particulars,⁵ its vision of an ideological shift as determined by the participants themselves in this vast global diaspora ranks among the most profound changes in regional post-colonial theory, made all the more powerful by its rhetorical clarity and sense of purpose.⁶ Like many studies in the post-Hau'ofa era of scholarship in Oceania, the pages that follow are influenced by his thinking about the Pacific diaspora in the twenty-first century.

I can't remember at what point I decided to write this story this way. My initial goal was to write a detailed history of Iosepa, a small community of Native Hawaiian Latter-day Saints established in 1889 at a ranch in Skull Valley, seventy-five miles southwest of Salt Lake City. Residents there had gathered, as faithful nineteenth-century Mormons did, to join other Latter-day Saints from around the world to prepare for Jesus Christ's prophesied return. The community was christened "Iosepa" in honor of Joseph F. Smith, the prophet and president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from 1901 to 1918. He had been a missionary in Hawaii in his younger years. Community members worked on the ranch, which was established as a joint stock corporation. In 1915, at the height of its prosperity, Joseph F. Smith announced that a temple would be built in Hawaii, and the community was abandoned. Today Iosepa is known primarily to three groups of people: historians of late nineteenth-century Utah (and then only those working on Mormon-related topics); descendants of the original Iosepa settlers; and, increasingly, Pacific Islanders living in close proximity to the Iosepa "ghost town" (the number of folks in this last category is large and growing each year).

I had heard the name Iosepa before I knew its full story or grasped the breadth of its connections to the community in Hawaii that I call home. I lived for a short time on Iosepa Street; so named, I discovered later, because

along it were the homes of those families who had returned from living in Utah. I had seen a brief recollection of life in Iosepa in an oral history collection, along with a short documentary produced for Utah television. The grandmother of a close friend arranged to be buried there, alongside her kin. I had listened, in our church meetings, to older people recounting the stories of the sacrifices and faith of their ancestors who settled in Utah at Iosepa. I had attended dinner at a friend's family reunion and heard aunties and uncles and grandmothers and grandfathers recount the stories they had heard about that place. Faith, sacrifice, and diligence. Poverty and discrimination. These were pioneers.

It occurred to me that the public memory of this community was at least as interesting and important as the history of the community itself. And of course the various commemorative activities surrounding Iosepa also make up the "real" history of the community, a history far more lasting and influential than an outsider's flawed rendering. As I learned more about the Hawaiian Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the history of Mormon settlement and colonization throughout the Great Basin, and the reverence accorded to the story of Iosepa among the Pacific Islanders in Utah today, I began to think that a simple retelling of Iosepa's twenty-eight years was inadequate, that the story of Iosepa transcends its short history in both directions. Looking westward, it began with the arrival of Mormon missionaries in Hawaii in 1850. Looking eastward, it began with the first communities of Native Hawaiians who came as settlers and sojourners to western North America. And from the perspective of contemporary communities of Pacific Islanders in the West, many of whom see in Iosepa a historical metaphor for their lived experience, it is a story that continues to unfold. Just as Native Hawaiian voyagers to western North America took advantage of opportunities provided by the vibrant Pacific trade network, Mormon missionaries' choice to seek converts in Hawai'i took advantage of the connections between the western United States and the Hawaiian islands. Both groups were traveling well-worn routes, made possible by the development of trade and transportation networks that linked Honolulu and Lahaina with places like San Francisco, Vancouver, and Salt Lake City. Seen from this perspective, the similarities between Iosepa and the communities that both preceded and followed it become sharper.

The Pacific diaspora is not limited to the western United States. Communities of diasporic Pacific Islanders are an important demographic component of Aotearoa/New Zealand (the Maori are hosts to a slew of migrants and settlers, both European and other Pacific Islanders) and Australia. Within Oceania itself there is a great deal of movement between

rural communities, generally concentrated in low-lying atolls, and the urban enclaves that have developed in places like Suva, Fiji, and Honolulu, Hawai'i.⁷ But the western United States is host to some of the largest communities of Pacific Islanders in the world. Salt Lake City has the largest concentrated population of Pacific Islanders outside of Honolulu, and cities in the west such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and Las Vegas have large, geographically distributed populations of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders.⁸ The history of Pacific Islanders in the American West has been overshadowed by a focus on historical studies of East Asian and Eastern European migrants, and contemporary communities have been eclipsed more recently by a concentration on immigration from Latin American nations.⁹ This has been exacerbated by a persistent practice among many historians of the American West of all but ignoring Hawai'i, Guam, Samoa, and Micronesia in their discussion of US imperialism and expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Regardless of its absence in many histories of the American West, however, the Pacific diaspora remains a vibrant and growing story in the urban West and shows no sign of abatement.

The story that I tell in the following chapters provides evidence of the deep ties between the Far West and Hawaii in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also depicts Hawai'i as part of Oceania, the region with which it has far deeper and more lasting cultural and historical ties.¹⁰ Scholars who argue for including Hawai'i in the regional history of the American West fail to address important movements of people in the opposite direction: the migration of Native Hawaiians (and in the postwar twentieth century, other Pacific Islanders) east as settlers and sojourners in the western United States. Without their stories, it is impossible to imagine a perspective in which Hawai'i exists not on the edge of empire, but in the center of a Pacific world that met the expansionist West full force.

Most histories of Hawai'i in the modern period make specific connections between Hawai'i's political economy and concurrent developments in western North America.¹¹ Although nearly all of these works are centered in Hawai'i, it is impossible to ignore the myriad connections in trade and immigration that developed among Honolulu, the western United States, and British Columbia. Most authors have felt it sufficient to document those relevant pieces of US economic and political history that directly affected the Hawaiian economy in the sandalwood, whaling, and sugar eras. In addition, the economic and political development that led to the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy by US forces in 1893 and Hawai'i's subsequent annexation to the United States in 1898 has clearly demanded historians'

attention. The two most obvious developments in the nineteenth-century American West with a direct impact on Hawaiian economic, political, and social life were the growth of the British and American fur trade in the Pacific Northwest prior to 1850 and the discovery of gold in California, leading to the growth of modern San Francisco.¹² Generally only passing mention is made in many otherwise excellent histories of Hawai'i to the substantial emigration of Hawaiian subjects to western North America and their employment in the American whaling industry.¹³ Although many synthetic histories of Hawai'i acknowledge the existence of Native Hawaiian emigration, few mention the experiences of the emigrants abroad, the ratio of sojourners to settlers, and other issues pertaining to Native Hawaiian emigrants. A story that receives far greater attention, for many reasons, is the immigration of Asian contract laborers to Hawai'i from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries and their experiences as laborers on Hawaiian sugar plantations. There are, however, several studies that focus on Hawai'i as a way station to the American West for these same East Asian laborers.¹⁴

Beginning in the early 1990s Native Hawaiian scholars began to reclaim Hawai'i's history, creating new interpretations of Hawai'i's past from an indigenous perspective. These scholars have understandably focused on the political and social history of the illegal overthrow of and subsequent annexation of Hawai'i to the United States in the late nineteenth century.¹⁵ Other works concentrate on the events leading up to the massive loss of land by Native Hawaiians in the Māhele of 1848 to 1854, rather than on Native Hawaiian emigration to western North America during that period. Although there has been a slew of articles over the years providing both firsthand accounts of Native Hawaiians abroad in the nineteenth century and general surveys of Native Hawaiians emigrating either as whalers or laborers in the fur trade,¹⁶ only recently have historical monographs taken Native Hawaiian emigration in the nineteenth century as their primary subject.¹⁷

In addition to asserting continuity between communities of diasporic Pacific Islanders in the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this book addresses the role of religion (in this case Mormonism) in creating and sustaining diasporic communities over time. The history of Mormonism in Hawai'i is the subject of several books, articles, and dissertations.¹⁸ Many Native Hawaiian converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints retained a large portion of their traditional beliefs and practices, a fact that vexed many a Mormon missionary well into the twentieth century.¹⁹ It is nearly impossible to define the process of religious conversion, let alone quantify it, so it must suffice to say that Native Hawaiian

Mormons in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continued, and many today continue, to practice and believe strongly in certain aspects of indigenous Hawaiian spirituality. Because this was frowned on and considered *hewa*, evil or sinful, to white missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it was practiced largely outside of their view and rarely if ever described in detail. However, some Native Hawaiians also believed in the gods of foreigners and incorporated Mormon religious beliefs into their everyday lives. I use the term “Native Hawaiian Saints” to reflect the idea of Saints as a self-referential social category within Mormonism. Saints in the nineteenth century gathered to Zion, adhered to the Word of Wisdom, believed *The Book of Mormon* to be the word of God revealed through the prophet Joseph Smith, and so forth. Certainly many Native Hawaiian Mormons did and believed in all of these things, and many considered themselves Saints because of it. But this in no way implies that they had effectively abandoned all allegiances to or belief in indigenous spirituality. Rather, Native Hawaiian Mormons, like all religious converts, held their new and old belief systems in a productive tension, often creating spiritual crosswalks between the old and new that served to strengthen faith in both, as many do to this day.

This book also looks at the collective memory of Iosepa among Pacific Islander Mormons in Utah today and draws heavily on the literature in the field of public history on commemoration, collective memory, and place. The graveyard at Iosepa in Skull Valley has become host to at least one important annual event commemorating the “Polynesian Pioneers” of Iosepa that draws impressive crowds from all areas of the United States. Beginning as early as the 1950s, before the restorative work to erect monuments and pavilions, rebuild access roads, and install kitchens and bathrooms, Native Hawaiian students at Brigham Young University regularly visited the site to clean graves, pull weeds, and *mālama*, or preserve, the dignity of the site. I address the reasons why the site has become so important to the substantial Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander community in the West today and how the reinterpretation and remembering of the site adds a new chapter to the history of Iosepa and the Pacific diaspora in the American West, connecting Pacific Islander communities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the growing communities of Pacific Islanders in the West today.

Iosepa was the result of the intersection of social, economic, and political forces that connected Hawai‘i and the American West throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. Mormonism in the American West and Hawai‘i, and the migrations and communities that it fostered, demonstrate the dual role of economic, political, and religious forces in

creating and sustaining diasporic communities globally. Ignoring the religious motivations behind the emigration of Native Hawaiian Mormons to the Salt Lake Valley obscures them as historical subjects for whom Mormonism was an important marker of individual and group identity. At the same time, ignoring the economic and political developments that made Mormon missionary activity in Hawai'i in the nineteenth century possible also obscures an important part of the same story. The story of Iosepa is an example of the Pacific diaspora to the western United States that needs to be told with all of these important forces in mind. As I present the story in the chapters that follow, I hope to do just that.

The basic organization of the book is as follows: Chapter 1 provides a context for the early connections that took Native Hawaiian emigrants east and Mormon missionaries west in the nineteenth century. It begins by examining the movement of Native Hawaiians to western North America starting in the early nineteenth century and the concurrent movement westward of Americans to Hawai'i. The Native Hawaiians took advantage of the vibrant and growing Pacific trade network that connected Hawai'i with the growing ports and cities of western North America. They reacted to the radical changes in Hawai'i that resulted from the expanding population of foreign settlers by exercising the options that the new social landscape provided. For a people with a seafaring history, such a course of action was hardly surprising, and their experiences abroad reverberated throughout Hawaii and laid the groundwork for subsequent voyages to the east.

Chapter 2 connects the actions of both Mormon missionaries and Native Hawaiian converts in Hawai'i to the economic and political situation from 1850 to 1889. I examine the political and social changes in Hawai'i from the arrival of the first American missionaries to the period of the Māhele and the Mortgage Act of 1874. I argue that these changes made it possible for Mormon missionaries to acquire land in Hawai'i where they could settle Native Hawaiian converts to prepare them to migrate to the Salt Lake Valley. Native Hawaiians who converted to Mormonism, however, used Mormon collectivism in the Palawai Valley and Lā'ie as a means to re-create the *ahupua'a* system of production and distribution, which was being eroded by land speculation in the post-Māhele years. In addition, chapter 2 addresses the development of religious ideologies within Mormonism that justified and strengthened Mormon leaders' commitment to a prolonged missionary presence in Hawai'i throughout the late nineteenth century.

Chapter 3 tells the story of Native Hawaiian Mormons' early migration to the Salt Lake Valley in Utah and the events leading up to their removal to Skull Valley in 1889. In the first section of this chapter I examine popular representations of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in Utah and the West.

I also explore the economic, political, and social conditions in Utah that created a community divided along religious as well as ethnic and racial lines. I focus on how Native Hawaiian Mormons negotiated their position vis-à-vis white Mormons, who marginalized them based on race, and non-Mormons, who used their presence in Salt Lake City to attack Mormon emigration policies. The final section of this chapter looks at the Utah Supreme Court case that denied citizenship to Native Hawaiian applicants based on their race and church leaders' decision to settle Native Hawaiian Saints in Skull Valley.

Chapter 4 focuses on the community of Iosepa in Skull Valley, Utah, now a ghost town (in)famous throughout both Hawaii and Utah as the home of a ranch established by LDS church leaders and funded through a joint stock company to settle Native Hawaiian converts removed from Salt Lake City in the summer of 1889. The community lasted until approximately 1917, when it was abandoned following president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Joseph F. Smith's announcement that a temple was being built in Lā'ie, Hawai'i. Smith advised community members to leave Skull Valley and the community they had built and return to Hawai'i. By 1917 all but a handful of Iosepa's 228 residents had tearfully left Skull Valley and returned to Hawai'i. I address the history of Iosepa in the ideological context of its founding as well as in the social and economic history of the Great Basin and the American West. Although the church managed Iosepa according to a modified model of the sugar plantation that it operated on O'ahu, the religious motivation behind Iosepa helped mitigate the difficulties and hardships of the settlement's early years. Eventually it was the religious faith of the settlers that led them to abandon the community at the height of its prosperity.

My final chapter looks at the contemporary Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander community in the Salt Lake Valley. The story of Iosepa provides an important link to the regional history, which connects Pacific Islander Mormons in Utah to a larger pioneer history, an important narrative for defining peoplehood in Mormon communities. Commemorative activities at Iosepa in Skull Valley and elsewhere laud the original settlers as "Polynesian pioneers." Redefining the Iosepa town site as sacred space metaphorically and symbolically links contemporary Pacific Islander communities in the Salt Lake Valley to the broader history of Mormons in Utah. This chapter demonstrates how remembering Iosepa collectively has become an important part of asserting religious identity for Pacific Islander Mormons in Utah and Hawai'i.