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## Forging American Womanhood: The Acculturation of Second-Generation Immigrant Girls in Honolulu, 1917–1938

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### INTRODUCTION

In January 1917, Mary Dillingham Frear, president of the Young Women’s Christian Association of Honolulu, announced her organization’s commitment to the education and acculturation of Hawaii’s native-born daughters of Asian descent. In a special issue of the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, she wrote of uplifting the territory’s diverse population by introducing Christian ideals: “Have we not in our midst, in the Christian Associations for our youth, men and women, a growing possibility of true democracy?”<sup>1</sup> As wife of a former territorial governor and sister of Walter S. Dillingham, “the islands’ most powerful business leader,” Frear was intimately connected to the minority white oligarchy that built fortunes on the backs of Asian workers brought to Hawaii to meet the agricultural economy’s demand for cheap labor.<sup>2</sup> The Wellesley-educated Frear was a philanthropist and respected community leader in her own right. In 1900, she and her mother, Emma Smith Dillingham, cofounded the YWCA of Honolulu to perpetuate the legacy of religiously inspired educational work of her missionary grandmother, who established an English-language school for Hawaiian children in the 1800s. Now, she would lead a group of Protestant

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women determined to Americanize a generation of women and girls born in the islands to migrant workers from China, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines. More than six decades after the first Asian contract workers set foot in the islands, many elite whites remained skeptical that the children of field laborers could be assimilated into the dominant community. By 1920, Hawaii was “in the midst of a classic race and class struggle . . . between two fundamental American principles—capitalism and democracy.”<sup>3</sup>

Twenty years earlier, male-dominated public debate over the annexation of the Hawaiian Islands—in Hawaii and in Washington—had been marked by racially charged opinions concerning the capacity of nonwhite peoples for democratic participation. Nevertheless, the territorial constitution, enacted in April 1900, paved the way for broader involvement of nonwhites in political life. The Organic Act, even as it ended the practice of contract labor and granted voting rights to native Hawaiians, denied Asian migrant workers “full-citizenship, equality, or participation in the sacred workings of self-government.”<sup>4</sup> Immigrant children born in the territory after 1898 were recognized as US citizens, but it would be decades before they would be eligible to vote. In the meantime, the Japanese community experienced steady growth, augmented by women and children, who continued to arrive until 1924, when the Exclusion Act barred immigration from Japan. At their peak in 1920, Japanese were the largest ethnic group in the islands at more than 42 percent.<sup>5</sup> Unexposed to the English language and American customs in their homes, second-generation Japanese were caught between the ideas of their parents and those of their birthland. Public schools were nominally responsible for instilling in them American values, but sugar and pineapple growers believed there was little to be gained by educating migrant children beyond eighth grade; the more schooling they received the less likely they would be to follow in their parents' footsteps as field laborers.<sup>6</sup> As concerns over their ability to assimilate the children of so large a group galvanized ruling-class whites, prominent churchwomen set out to socialize young immigrant women and girls, a process for which no group in the ruling community was prepared.

There is no shortage of scholarly writing about the lives of Hawaii's missionaries and the organized activities of their female descendants in the public sphere.<sup>7</sup> Like their upper-class counterparts in the continental United States, privileged island women made their public presence felt by forming groups to coordinate religiously inspired benevolent, charitable, and educational activities in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> There has been limited historical focus, however, on the work of missionary daughters and

granddaughters through the YWCA of Honolulu.<sup>9</sup> One reason for this is the narrow perception of the association as an innocuous social and recreational club for middle- and upper-class white women, particularly in the first decade and a half of its existence. Another, more important reason, is the tendency of historians focusing on Hawaii to relegate women and girls to the margins of social relevance, an inclination often extended to institutions that served them.<sup>10</sup> As I will show, however, understanding the internal dynamics of the YWCA permits a deeper understanding of how the daughters of Asian immigrants in Hawaii came to identify as Americans. World War I was a catalyst for expanding the local YWCA's work with Oahu's racially diverse female population, as it moved to align more closely with the national association's coordination of wholesome entertainment for soldiers in training camps across the country, including the Territory of Hawaii.<sup>11</sup> The interwar period saw a sustained effort on the part of the YWCA of Honolulu to shape the gender, class, religious, and national identities of second-generation immigrant girls, responsibility for whom was largely unaddressed by existing institutions.<sup>12</sup>

In this article, I examine the YWCA's acculturation of Oahu's multiethnic teenage female population in the 1920s and 1930s through the creation of transnational social spaces aimed at encouraging children's acceptance of American values and Christian virtues. While my primary focus is on the acculturation of second-generation women of Japanese descent, the article is framed in the context of religious, educational, and economic controversies that gripped Honolulu in the early decades of the twentieth century, a period characterized by the growing involvement of white, educated, Christian women in the nascent field of social work. Accordingly, I explore the influence of race, class, and gender on interactions occurring between second-generation Asians and privileged whites who worked for the YWCA, both as volunteers and paid professionals. The YWCA of Honolulu's emergence as an organization supportive of the public schools and social welfare agencies coincided with the advent of World War I, when thousands of second-generation immigrant children attended school and entered the workforce. Beginning in 1918, it expanded its outreach and began engaging young migrant women between the ages of twelve and eighteen in "character building" activities as part of a socialization program developed by the national YWCA and adopted for use in Honolulu to incorporate the daughters of plantation workers into the community as productive workers and loyal Americans. The club methodology was also used to engage and influence women seeking skilled and unskilled

employment in the city. As a “highly formalized institution,” the YWCA created transnational spaces in which to inculcate Christian and American values in young women of Asian descent, while ensuring that they continued to serve the minority white community, as their parents had done.<sup>13</sup> Its interactions with immigrant girls were repressive and strongly reminiscent of the “social control” motivations of education and welfare institutions that sought “to create a tractable and low-wage labor force . . . enforce discipline in the workplace, [and] impose middle-class values and behavioral norms on lower-class and immigrant folk.”<sup>14</sup>

### I. BACKGROUND ON THE TWO YWCAs

The YWCA of Honolulu was established by descendants of Protestant missionaries whose ancestors migrated to the Sandwich Islands from New England in the nineteenth century. Many of its founding members belonged, by birth or marriage, to Hawaii’s ruling *haole* (white) oligarchy, which held authority over island political, business, and religious life. In the first decade and a half of the twentieth century, the local YWCA offered religious and recreational instruction to its predominantly white, middle-class members, who were part of a racial minority making up just 7 percent of the territorial population.<sup>15</sup> The social spaces they inhabited in urban Honolulu represented a bastion of relative luxury and privilege—featuring education, dining, and fitness facilities—far removed from the lives of immigrants laboring on sugar cane and pineapple plantations just a few miles from town. The founders saw the association as an agent of social melioration whose programs served as a bulwark of traditional Christian values they believed would come under siege as the population grew and diversified.

The Honolulu association was connected to, yet autonomous from, the national YWCA, but by the time the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, its education programs were increasingly influenced by trained consultants from the continental United States. These “secretaries,” as the national organization called them, were grounded in social work, an emerging career option for college-educated women. Members of this new class of professionals arrived in Honolulu in greater numbers during and immediately after the war, leaving their mark in the form of outreach programs that changed the scope and direction of the local association’s work. Their field reports indicated an ongoing fascination with Hawaii’s social diversity, the legacy of more than a half century of transnational migration from Asia and Europe. Sustained cooperation between these two

groups of privileged women—one local, the other national—exposed critical differences in the way they viewed their mission. Most Hawaii-born oligarchs involved with the YWCA were evangelical churchwomen whose approach to the education of immigrant girls stemmed from a sense of *noblesse oblige* and desire to preserve the established socioeconomic hierarchy. Conversely, visiting representatives of the YWCA of the USA were social progressives who sought to guide women in local communities in the philosophy and purpose of the organization as it evolved over time. By the end of the 1910s, a source of friction between the two was the national YWCA's growing "commitment to the political process as an agent of reform," which missionary descendants such as Mary Frear viewed with ambivalence, given her close family ties to island business interests.<sup>16</sup> Both groups regarded the education of immigrant children as a form of Americanization, but local board women viewed the work through an evangelical lens, while professional advisers were driven by a reform impulse that grew stronger in the second decade of the twentieth century.

## II. BUDDHISM AND THE LANGUAGE SCHOOL CONTROVERSY

The acculturation of second-generation Asian girls occurred in the context of related religious and educational controversies that simmered in the late nineteenth century. Following the introduction of Buddhism to Hawaii in 1889, plantation managers recognized its "stabilizing effect" on workers.<sup>17</sup> Over the objection of Christian leaders, who viewed Buddhism as a competitive threat whose tenets were fundamentally un-American, planters permitted Japanese priests to attend to workers' spiritual needs, believing it would help them endure the hardships of drudgery. The concerns of Christian church leaders were heightened by the spread of Buddhist-sponsored churches and schools encouraging nisei children's retention of Japanese language and culture. Despite the persistent efforts of prominent Christian clerics, such as the Reverend Takie Okumura, who spearheaded the establishment of Japanese language schools that promoted Christian religious values, less than 3 percent of Japanese in Hawaii had "formally accepted Christianity" by 1917.<sup>18</sup> The tempestuous religious climate was fueled by racism and distrust, as Christian and Buddhist evangelists struggled for the hearts and minds of immigrants.

Concerns in the predominantly white Christian community came to a head in the 1920s over the proliferation of Japanese language schools, despite a revision of the schools' curricula "to better prepare local-born Japanese for

American citizenship.”<sup>19</sup> In an effort to diffuse community tensions stemming from the language schools, issei parents established an educational association to delete the content of textbooks seen as “encouraging emperor worship and Japanese nationalism.”<sup>20</sup> Still, the rapid spread of Japanese language schools stoked the fears of Christian clerics, who were convinced that the schools represented “a menace to the Americanization of the Territory.”<sup>21</sup> When the century began, there were ten Japanese language schools in Hawaii, enrolling about 1,500 students. By 1920, an estimated 98 percent of the 20,651 nisei students enrolled in public schools also attended Japanese schools after their public school classes were done for the day. No serious opposition to language schools was organized until World War I, when “a wave of exaggerated patriotism swept the nation.” In 1920, the territorial legislature passed a law, Act 30, requiring foreign language schools to ensure that instructors reinforced ideals of democracy and taught US history and institutions, and limiting them to one hour of instruction per day. Act 30 was especially punitive for the working parents of younger children, as it prohibited first and second graders from attending language schools until they learned English, thus eliminating the schools as a form of childcare.<sup>22</sup>

The religion and language school controversies were inextricably linked with attitudes about Americanization, identity, and conflicting assumptions about assimilation. In her assessment of the influence of the Japanese language schools in the lives of first- and second-generation Japanese, Eileen Tamura posited that while many issei parents believed the schools would help “bridge the language and cultural gaps separating themselves and their children,” both issei community leaders and Americanizers assumed they were more effective in transferring the language and values of Japan than they actually were. Interviews with nisei adults who attended the schools as children suggest that “language schools were ineffective agents of cultural transmission because the Nisei . . . were generally indifferent to the schools” and more interested in their regular schools where instruction was in English. Tamura also noted that Japanese parents believed that the Japanese schools provided “moral education” that was “compatible with American values and helped Nisei become better citizens.”<sup>23</sup>

### III. AMERICANIZATION AND THE GIRL RESERVES

Religious intolerance among whites in Honolulu was hardened by the Americanization movement that began at the turn of the century and grew

into a “feverish crusade” during and immediately after the World War I. Yet, the YWCA of Honolulu’s approach to immigrant incorporation—as reflected in the influence of visiting consultants from the national office—called for preserving ethnic cultures and traditions to help in easing their adjustment to American life.<sup>24</sup> When the national YWCA began formulating principles that would guide their work with foreign communities, they consulted Edith Terry Bremer, a graduate of the University of Chicago, whose views on immigration were influenced by Chicago settlement workers and scholars. These so-called liberal assimilationists were “sympathetic to the human and social plight of immigrants in the new land,” and “rejected harsh demands for immediate Americanization.” Their views had a “shaping influence” on Bremer, who conceived of “service-oriented agencies designed to protect immigrant women, address their problems, and facilitate their adjustment to life in the United States.”<sup>25</sup> She developed YWCA-sponsored International Institutes offering the immigrant mothers of American-born children opportunities to learn English and practice sewing, cooking, and other home-making skills as part of a “broader and more coherent program of education, recreation, and case work.” The YWCA’s work with school-age girls and young working women combined with programs for first-generation women formed the twin pillars of its outreach to immigrant females. Historian Raymond Mohl indicated that by the 1920s Bremer’s ideas evolved under the influence of New York City educator Isaac Berkson, who advanced a “community theory” of immigrant work that sought to “preserve the immigrant heritage, transmit the old culture to the second generation in America, and generally promote cultural pluralism.”<sup>26</sup>

In 1919, the YWCA of Honolulu launched a character-building program for second-generation girls under the direction of nationally trained secretary Gertrude Gogin, who developed a Christian-based method of group social work derived from techniques that sought to impress moral and patriotic values on teenage girls during the war. Settlement workers on the US mainland had organized women and children into groups for education and recreation since the late nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> Gogin’s methods drew on social settlements, playground and recreation movements, progressive education and social reform movements, and the developing fields of psychology and sociology.<sup>28</sup> The YWCA’s program, called the Girl Reserves, involved the organization of schoolgirls into clubs, supervised by adult leaders who encouraged their participation in activities intended to foster ideals of Christian morality, self-sacrifice, and group unity. An early manual indicated that the Girl Reserves program “endeavors to give girls

through normal, natural activities the habits, insights and ideals which will make them responsible Christian women; capable and ready to help make America more true to its best hopes and traditions.”<sup>29</sup> The program was embraced by conservative, evangelical founders of the YWCA of Honolulu, who worried about un-American, non-Christian influences in the lives of the city’s native-born Asian children. It was a fluid form of outreach that allowed adult leaders considerable autonomy to adjust program activities depending on the young women with whom they worked. Some club advisers emphasized socialization and character education while others promoted group cohesion through recreation. Notwithstanding differences in emphasis, leadership development and democratic participation were key elements of club training.

As she surveyed Honolulu’s immigrant community, Gogin was struck by how “Americanized” its children behaved, despite their “foreign” appearance. During a visit to one public school she watched a multiracial group of students pledging allegiance to the Stars and Stripes and singing “America the Beautiful” “with a fervor one does not always find in schools on the mainland.” At a club meeting for schoolgirls, she was greeted with a stirring rendition of the patriotic song “Over There” by a group of Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Hawaiian girls:

One could not help but wonder what was to be their future and the future of America when one learned the next day that many of the very little “Yanks” were sent to native language schools for three hours after the regular public school session was over and that in the homes of many of them not one word of English was spoken and not one American custom observed. How are we to make them real Americans with the highest standards and what must be the part of the Y.W.C.A. is a question which is constantly before us.<sup>30</sup>

Armed with an understanding of the influence of the language schools and an appreciation for the challenge of countering the “foreign” influence in the homes of girls they were targeting, YWCA club organizers set about the task of Americanization. Girls who elected to participate in club activities were separated by age, interest, and institutional affiliation into three categories: grade schoolgirls, high school girls, and “business girls.”<sup>31</sup>



## IV. CLUB WORK ON THE ISLAND OF OAHU

Field reports of club advisers offer a glimpse into a world of transnational social interaction, suggesting ways in which young women asserted themselves in response to the YWCA's efforts to forge group harmony. Early organizers discovered that encouraging self-governance through the appointment of club officers could be challenging, as many girls accepted their perceived place in Hawaii's racial hierarchy. Adviser Marie Elliot observed, for example, that girls of nonwhite ethnicity deferred instinctively to their white counterparts: "At Kalihiwaena [intermediate school, the girls] had been practicing for a gymnastic exhibition to be given at the Kalihi Hospital at Thanksgiving time, but the only *haole* girl in the club decided that it was not worthwhile to go over, so the rest of the group decided to give up their Thanksgiving program."<sup>32</sup> Another adviser was met with a similar reaction when an Asian girl was elected club president at the Territorial Normal and Training School in 1921. "This has caused some trouble in the high school because a Chinese girl was chosen, whom the white girls would not follow," she wrote in her report. "In order to get at the heart of the matter a meeting has been called of the white girls alone, for discussion and to challenge them to stand by the Orientals as a piece of Americanization work."<sup>33</sup> Another issue hampering early club organization was the low level of participation of Japanese schoolgirls, something attributed to the language schools' "Buddhist influence."

Honolulu club activities centered on four areas viewed as essential to young women's development: health, knowledge, service, and spirit. The emphasis on physical fitness is clear in photographs from the 1920s, which show uniformed schoolgirls participating in gymnastics, folk dances, Indian club-and-wand exercises, and running races. Given the lack of recreational programs in the public schools, hikes, camping trips, and all-day picnics at the popular Beach Club in Waikiki were among frequent outdoor activities, as were interclub competitions. Typically, thirty minutes of each club meeting was devoted to physical activity. The educational side of club life was similarly tied to the girls' physical well-being. Art, music, and citizenship training were employed in such a way as to be interesting rather than academically demanding. A common theme of group discussions centered on how to achieve the qualities of the ideal American girl. Girls were instructed in manners, posture, etiquette, and habits of proper dress, and taught to attend to hygienic details of hair and nails. Girlhood training also included an introduction to domestic skills meant to prepare young

women for the traditional role of American housewife. This type of instruction was of ironic practicality, as the YWCA was simultaneously grooming girls for employment as domestic servants in the homes of wealthy families. Cooking, sewing, home economics, and decorative arts were standard features of the YWCA club curriculum and were popular among members. A third area of club life was the expectation that young women, regardless of background or social status, would satisfy their civic responsibility through community service. Girl Reserves visited the economically disadvantaged at area hospitals and social welfare institutions. They sang and performed gymnastics or skits during regular visits to the King's Daughters Home, Kalihi Orphanage, Children's Hospital, Detention Home, and other service agencies. At Christmas and other holidays, they made flower leis to donate to the Social Service Bureau, delivered food and toys to indigent families and raised money for them. Sometimes, the lessons of Christian charity hit home with poignancy, as when members of the Girl Reserves Victory Club raised money to buy fixings for a Thanksgiving dinner for a widow and her children. Adviser Alice Moore noted that the gesture had "meant real sacrifice for these girls and when the name of the needy woman was given in the next club meeting one of the girls arose and with great satisfaction announced that it was her aunt who had been so generously helped by the club."<sup>34</sup>

Spirit was arguably the most challenging area of club emphasis. From its inception as a youth movement, the Girl Reserves was intended to provide girls with "opportunities for practicing Christian living."<sup>35</sup> The YWCA stopped short of direct proselytizing, but advisers did not discourage reactions interpreted as evidence that the religious message was getting through. At a rally attended by 150 junior and senior club girls, for example, the Tse Mui Club "presented a pantomime showing what Christianity had done for Chinese girls."<sup>36</sup> YWCA literature suggested obliquely that clubs should encourage "Christian thinking and being" without specifying how secretaries might walk the line between encouraging a Christian orientation and trying to save young souls. While religious education was regarded as "an underlying principle which cannot be separated from the whole fabric" of a Christian's life, the Girl Reserves manual indicated that "much of the girl's training in worship should come directly through her relationship with the Church."<sup>37</sup>

YWCA of Honolulu leaders viewed the growing popularity of the Girl Reserves as an indication of its influence in the community. During the 1920s, when club efforts were concentrated in urban Honolulu, club

membership fluctuated from six hundred to about one thousand participants per year.<sup>38</sup> In the next decade, participation doubled as activity expanded to rural plantations and schools where recreational opportunities were limited. Concerns of social workers, educators, businesspeople, and law enforcement officers hastened the spread of the movement. YWCA and other community leaders felt it unwise to neglect the needs of hundreds of girls attending rural schools that offered no after-school activities. More worrisome were the girls who left school with no vocational skills and limited employment options. Some women viewed clubs as social medicine in the fight against crime and juvenile delinquency. If Hawaii's forgotten teens were left to fend for themselves, without the help of an agency offering friendship and guidance in their adolescent years, there was no telling what might become of them. "The future problem which such a group presents to the community," wrote Girl Reserve adviser Esther Carter in 1931, "is one not to be disregarded for long." Citing the need for clubs in rural areas of Oahu that were further away from YWCA facilities in downtown Honolulu, she warned that "every school community there is harboring a group which is as tinder ready for the spark."<sup>39</sup>

Later that year, rural club work began in earnest under Esther Park, a devout Christian of Korean parentage, who achieved near legendary status in Hawaii and her homeland during more than thirty years with the YWCA. Park was just a year old when her parents migrated to the islands in 1903 as contract laborers. She went on to attend the University of Hawaii and, after a brief teaching career, was recruited by the YWCA of Honolulu to oversee the expansion of rural clubs.<sup>40</sup> Within months of starting the "long dreamed of rural work," Park organized fourteen junior high school clubs boasting a membership of three hundred fifty-four girls. Her efforts included the earliest attempts to organize out-of-school girls. A survey indicated that about half of all rural girls who left school after the eighth or ninth grades looked for work in their communities or in town. The other half stayed home to help their parents.<sup>41</sup>

## V. SIGNS OF TENSION AT THE YWCA

From the inception of the Girl Reserves in Hawaii, representatives of the national organization were ambivalent about its successful application in the islands. Gogin was one of the first visiting secretaries to candidly assess the community's social and economic power structures and suggest that the insularity of Hawaii's oligarchs posed a threat to the progress of association

work. She believed that plantation-style paternalism and the rigid social hierarchy hampered the advancement of democratic ideals:

The problem of leadership for all agencies [is] a great one. The same women are used on all boards and committees. Moreover, this small proportion of whites has meant intermarriage and a curious inter-relationship, personal and business, which can only come in an insular community. . . . There are certain controlling agencies which must always be considered as for example, the Sugar Planter's [*sic*] Association, composed of perhaps the most influential men, the Hawaiian Board of Missions, the Pineapple Plantation men, and certain other commercial and shipping interests.<sup>42</sup>

Characterizing the influence of “controlling agencies” as a “delicate situation,” Gogin advised her national colleagues to proceed with caution, lest elite whites see their authority threatened by rapidly expanding work with the daughters of plantation workers. Such concerns were grounded in the national association’s gradual embrace of progressive labor reforms in the second decade of the century. Until the 1910s the weight of the YWCA’s national reputation had rested on religiously based service programs intended to safeguard women’s physical and moral health. Programs embodied a protective element in which advisers acted as “moral mothers,” promoting values fundamental to the achievement of American womanhood. After the war, progressive YWCA leaders became increasingly vocal about the need to address social inequalities associated with industrial capitalism. They coaxed the national organization into endorsing industrial-reform standards, including the abolition of child labor and the introduction of the eight-hour workday. The women adopted these pro-labor positions at national conventions, even as local associations across the country—including the YWCA of Honolulu—continued to emphasize noontime morale-building exercises for working women. The result, according to one historian, was “an internecine competition . . . between the Industrial Department and other factions within the YWCA.”<sup>43</sup> Historian Mary S. Sims referred to the 1910s as a period of “social awakening” for the national organization, as it edged away from a traditional evangelical orientation that emphasized religion as a personal experience and toward the “application of Christian principles to social and economic problems.”<sup>44</sup>

At the 1920 national convention in Cleveland, Ohio, delegates adopted a sixteen-point platform known as the “Social Ideals of the Churches,” the

most comprehensive of the industrial-reform resolutions adopted by the organization to date. The most controversial plank was an affirmation of the right of workers to bargain collectively. Another hotly debated resolution called for the use of association resources and influence “to help secure such legislation as shall promote the welfare of young women.”<sup>45</sup> It was a revolution of a kind for many women in attendance, some remembering it as one of the most inspiring religious conventions they had ever attended. Others believed the YWCA had become too radical and that it should “stay out of politics.” The convention prompted some notable resignations, including the abrupt defection of one prominent national board member who stalked out of the proceedings in midsession.<sup>46</sup>

Honolulu sent two representatives to Cleveland that year, the first time an island delegation had attended a national convention. There were no resulting defections among prominent members of the local board; still, news of the organization’s progressive turn could not have been far from the delegation’s thoughts. Nineteen-twenty was a volatile year in Hawaii labor relations, as more than three-quarters of Oahu’s plantation workforce went on strike for better wages and working conditions. In the months before the convention, Mary Frear informed her fellow officers that, while attending a separate conference in San Francisco, she had been “charged by the [YWCA] Field Office to come home and think very hard” about getting more involved in the lives of working women. Board minutes indicate that the association’s executive director recommended that the Honolulu YWCA “take some action in case help was needed by women and girls in the big compounds where the oriental strikers are gathering.”<sup>47</sup> No official position on the grievances of the striking workers was adopted, but she encouraged the YWCA to consider ways of assisting women whose lives were affected by labor unrest.

## VI. THE BUSINESS CLUB MOVEMENT

The Honolulu YWCA had begun organizing the first clubs for “working girls” in “skilled” occupations as early as 1916, but activity was confined initially to Caucasian women. One of the first was the Honolulu Business Girls’ Club, established by sixty young women “engaged in business or employed in clerical or mercantile work” in the downtown area.<sup>48</sup> At a social gathering in the spring of that year, businessman and territorial governor-to-be Wallace R. Farrington expressed the community’s support for the club by noting that “the principal things that a club like this engenders are

enthusiasm, a uniform spirit of courtesy, the desire for giving real service-value, and the effort to know one's job better."<sup>49</sup> By all accounts, this early club served a social and recreational function. After the war, the business club movement was expanded to include "unskilled" young women of mixed race in the city's "industrial" occupations. Employees of the downtown laundries were among the first to organize working girls' clubs. YWCA staff and volunteers visited owners and discussed the benefits of club life for the young women and the businesses involved. Secretary Grace Potter suggested that these clubs were "worthwhile for the workers who are accustomed to rushing back to their places of work as soon as they have finished a hurried lunch."<sup>50</sup> After a visit to the American Sanitary Laundry a few months later, she observed that "the more the laundry is visited the greater the need for wholesome recreation at the noon hour is realized."<sup>51</sup> Managers of the American Sanitary Laundry and French Laundry encouraged employees to participate in recreational activity during their lunch break to raise morale and boost productivity. Activities ranged from singing and breathing exercises to sewing and English lessons. As the clubs spread to city bakeries and the pineapple cannery, testimonials indicated the support of other local businesses, including Love's Biscuit and Bread Company: "We can testify to the excellent influence of the Young Women's Christian Association among the girls who have been employed in our packing department. It has helped them educationally and physically. It has raised their standards of health and living. We believe in the Y.W.C.A."<sup>52</sup> Board minutes and club reports were generally mute on working conditions. When passing references were made to wages earned or hours worked, little or no follow-up was provided.

Meanwhile, the job market was tightening due to an apparent increase in the number of Caucasian females making their way to the islands from the continental United States. Newspapers told of single women drawn to Hawaii by a favorable male-to-female ratio and romantic notions that Honolulu was a "paradise for the unmarried girl [and] that all she must do is . . . come over, work for a short while and marry a sugar planter."<sup>53</sup> In response, the Honolulu YWCA established an employment bureau to serve as a "clearing house of occupational activities for girls and women" under the direction of "efficiency expert" and visiting secretary Kathryn Power. In 1923, the YWCA expanded employment services at the request of the local Chamber of Commerce, and it became more directly involved in job placement. During the first month of 1924, Power's office registered thirty-five women looking for stenographer positions and placed eight. A month

earlier, twenty-eight women had come looking for clerical jobs, but only five managed to secure work. Another reason for the worsening employment outlook was greater competition among the daughters of plantation workers for a limited number of desirable city jobs. The resulting labor surplus exacerbated the tendency of employers to categorize women's work abilities by ethnicity. At the same time, YWCA clubs played a role in influencing the bleak job prospects for young women to the extent that character-building activities emphasizing citizenship, responsibility, and leadership development fostered ambitions that outpaced opportunities. More females were finishing high school and going on to college, but employment options in Honolulu remained limited. The YWCA saw an increase in the number of job seekers for whom few opportunities existed, a situation that worsened during the Great Depression. The employment office registered 2,500 female job seekers in 1928, 3,300 in 1930, and more than 4,700 in 1931. That same year, employers listed 2,700 openings with the YWCA, and 1,900 women were placed, most of them in domestic service.<sup>54</sup>

## VII. HELP WANTED: DOMESTIC SERVANTS

Year after year, domestic service was the one occupation in which available positions outpaced applicants. Indeed, no field of employment more clearly illustrated the dominant culture's rigid attitudes about women, work, race, and class. Census figures from the beginning of the century show that domestic and personal-service jobs were the largest nonagricultural source of employment for women in the territory.<sup>55</sup> As the Honolulu association expanded and diversified its membership, this line of work seemed to have an impact on women at every level—from board members to club girls—since the former relied on servants in their own homes, and the association sought to match women with private requests for housemaids. Accordingly, demand for household servants at the YWCA's employment department was nearly always double the number of applicants.

The notion of domestic service as a "respectable" occupation for young women came easily to upper- and middle-class leaders of the YWCA—both on the mainland United States and in Hawaii—because it provided protective features consistent with traditional programs. At the end of the nineteenth century, moral reformers in northeastern American cities viewed domestic service as a comparatively safe employment alternative for so-called women adrift. "In the middle-class household," one historian wrote,

“the girl could remain under the watchful eye of a moral woman, and thus avoid the corruption and evil influences in other types of employment.”<sup>56</sup> Domestic service offered steady wages, regular meals, and the protection of a surrogate family.<sup>57</sup> But household employment also held the potential for exploitation. Though some employers showed parental affection for their charges, the relationship was prone to abuse. Lack of uniformity among employers, long hours, limited privacy, and unclear expectations plagued the field. Wealthy families in Hawaii had long complained of the challenge of finding and keeping good help, such that by the mid-1930s, YWCA employment surveys indicated that Honolulu women considered almost any other type of work—in laundries, stores, hotels, and restaurants—preferable to domestic service.

It was more than a pocketbook issue to the Honolulu YWCA’s youngest members, many of whom saw it as an occupation that extended attitudes of paternalism that their parents had experienced as plantation workers. By the 1930s, YWCA women at the highest levels of the Honolulu association were wrestling with the racial and moral dimensions of an issue on which there were sharp differences of opinion. Some shared the view of Mary L. Cady, who addressed the issue publicly after serving as director of the local association for four years: “Our outstanding problem here at the YWCA is that of the young girls and women who are seeking employment and who haven’t a chance, except in domestic service.”<sup>58</sup> By that time, nearly 90 percent of the jobs listed at the employment bureau were for housemaids. Cady spoke for many privileged Honolulu women who believed that immigrant daughters should be realistic about their prospects: “We must train our young women to be good housekeepers, to have resources within themselves; to be contented with the lives they will live. Home economics should be the most important study for the majority of the young women of Hawaii; they should abandon the false standards which have convinced them that they should seek ‘white collar’ jobs.”<sup>59</sup>

Others rejected the suggestion that a woman’s occupational suitability might be influenced by her parents’ race. Employment secretary Jane Dranga, who was trained in the national YWCA’s methods and had spent several years working in Honolulu, based her perspective on interviews with 15,000 young women over a five-year period and concluded that many employment hurdles confronting second-generation Asian women were compounded by pervasive stereotypes. Interviews with nisei women, in particular, suggested that they were frequently recommended to employers seeking “quiet” and “scrupulously neat” housemaids:



The demands of the employers in this occupation present something of a paradox. They look for the servile attitude of the immigrant while at the same time and in the same person they require the ability to speak English and to be readily adaptable to modern household equipment. The modern Occidental pattern of living has been acquired by our Oriental peoples at the expense of the former obsequious and deferring attitude of servants towards master.<sup>60</sup>

Dranga's willingness to raise such sensitive issues publicly was notable. She had joined the association as a club leader and gone on to direct its employment bureau, remaining in that position long enough to see the adoption of standards for domestic employment in 1938. The annual meeting that year featured a panel discussion with representatives of the association's diverse constituencies—including a household employee, a "business girl," a young married woman, a member of the University of Hawaii student association, and several members of the Girl Reserves. The discussion touched on issues facing women from each group, including family relationships, religious attitudes, and employment. While it did not immediately result in an endorsement of the right of employees to bargain collectively, it was the clearest indication to date of the local YWCA's acceptance of democratic participation across racial and class lines. It was also symbolic of the Honolulu association's tentative acceptance of the progressive policies of the national YWCA. The resulting code of standards placed limits on the number of work hours, suggested improvements in living conditions, and recognized the need for employee privacy. It also called for "development of a new attitude on the part of the employers to help employees feel that they may be proud of their occupations."<sup>61</sup>

Despite such apparent progress, Dranga left the Honolulu YWCA three months later. A local newspaper editorialized that she had "incurred the criticism she was raising the standards of employment too high," and that some employers believed that she expected attitudes to change too quickly.<sup>62</sup> Dranga's departure also revealed tensions between volunteer members of the local board and professionally trained staff. By ruffling the feathers of the Honolulu association's elite board members, she exemplified the progressive attitude of national specialists who brought incremental change to accepted ways of doing things. Nevertheless, eighteen years after the Cleveland convention, Honolulu lagged in its acceptance of progressive reforms. Institutional complacency and a traditional interpretation of the association's mission as a provider of services rather than a force for change characterized

the position of the local YWCA well into the 1930s.

### CONCLUSION

Social historians have devoted little attention to the YWCA of Honolulu's role in the acculturation of second-generation immigrant females in the 1920s and 1930s. Through a program known as the Girl Reserves, it sought to unite the school-age daughters of Oahu's ethnically diverse communities under a common umbrella and instill in them qualities of leadership, citizenship, and Christian virtue. YWCA club activities for young working women, ostensibly aimed at enhancing recreational opportunities and offering outlets for wellness and personal fulfillment, also supported employers' aims to boost morale and productivity. More troubling was the YWCA's influence in limiting the career aspirations of second-generation Asian women by encouraging their acceptance of employment as domestic servants. By reinforcing racial stereotypes, the agency's employment bureau served as an instrument of repression, whose paternalistic practices were reminiscent of tactics employed by sugar plantations to keep workers in their place. Thus, the YWCA of Honolulu reinforced the "hierarchy of labor organized by race" that characterized social and political life in Hawaii in the first four decades of the twentieth century.<sup>63</sup>

But clubs also reflected the Honolulu association's gradual evolution from provider of religious and recreational services to agent for social change. When the national association embraced increasingly progressive reforms in the second decade of the century, resulting tensions prompted local board women to question their role in hampering the social mobility of second- and third-generation immigrant women. Reforms were slow in coming, but by the end of the 1930s, the YWCA sponsored open discussions that led to the adoption of a code of standards for employment of domestic servants. Accordingly, club activities may be viewed as laying the groundwork for the development of leadership skills, acceptance of democratic principles, and gradual transfer of civic authority to the city's multiethnic females in the years prior to World War II.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, January 27, 1917.

<sup>2</sup> Walter F. Frear was Hawaii's third territorial governor and former chief justice of the territorial supreme court. See David E. Stannard, *Honor Killing: How the Infamous "Massie Affair" Transformed Hawai'i* (New York: Viking, 2005), 1, 255.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Dean Gething, "The Educational and Civic Leadership of Elsie Wilcox, 1920–1932," *Hawaiian Journal of History* 16 (1982): 189.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 234; Lauren L. Basson, *White Enough to Be American? Race Mixing, Indigenous People, and the Boundaries of State and Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 121.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew W. Lind, *Hawaii's People*, 3rd ed. (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1967), 28–31.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Dean Gething Hughes, *Women and Children First: The Life and Times of Elsie Wilcox of Kauai* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 64.

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Grimshaw, *Paths of Duty: American Missionary Wives in Nineteenth-Century Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989); for educational and religious impulses guiding the public activities of missionary descendants, see Albert F. Judd, *Missionary Album: Portraits and Biographical Sketches of the American Protestant Missionaries to the Hawaiian Islands* (Honolulu: Hawaiian Mission Children's Society, 1969); and Gwenfread Allen, *Bridge Builders: The Story of Theodore and Mary Atherton Richards* (Honolulu: Hawaii Conference Foundation, 1970).

<sup>8</sup> Representative of feminist scholarship in this area are Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); and Pricilla Murolo, *The Common Ground of Womanhood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). For women's associations in Hawaii, see Margit Misangyi Watts, *High Tea at Halekulani: Feminist Theory and American Clubwomen* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Exceptions include Judith Dean Gething Hughes, *Women and Children First: The Life and Times of Elsie Wilcox of Kauai* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996); and Bruce P. Bottorff, "Foundations of Influence: YWCA of Honolulu Structures and the Assertion of Moral Authority, 1900–1927," *Hawaiian Journal of History* 52 (2018): 117–42.

<sup>10</sup> Recent national and international research takes the organized activity of younger girls more seriously. Examples include Jennifer Helgren, *American Girls and Global Responsibility: A New Relation to the World during the Early Cold War* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017); and Jennifer Helgren and Colleen A. Vasconcellos, eds., *Girlhood: A Global History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Ralph S. Kuykendall in *Hawaii in the World War* (Honolulu: The Historical Commission, 1928) devotes two chapters to the YWCA of Honolulu's war work under the Wilson administration's Commission on Training Camp Activities.

<sup>12</sup> Research tangentially focused on the Honolulu YWCA has dealt with its influence in the lives of specific immigrant groups and individuals. See Anne Soon Choi, "'Hawaii Has Been My America': Generation, Gender, and Korean Immigrant Experience in Hawaii Before World War II," *American Studies* 45, no. 3 (2004): 139–55; and Rika Lee, "Inventing Korean Tradition in Hawaii: Race Relations and Modernization of Korean Immigrant Women in Prewar Hawaii," *Journal of Korean Association of Women's History* 26 (June 2017): 27–56.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Faist, "Transnationalism," in Steven J. Gold and Stephanie J. Nawyn, eds., *Routledge International Handbook of Migration Studies* (London: Routledge, 2013), 451–52.

<sup>14</sup> Clarke A. Chambers, "Toward a Redefinition of Welfare History," *Journal of American History* 73, no. 2 (Sept. 1986): 416. Published online by Oxford University Press on behalf of Organization of American Historians. Accessed March 18, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1908228>.

<sup>15</sup> Eileen H. Tamura, *Americanization, Acculturation, and Ethnic Identity: The Nisei Generation in Hawaii* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 58.

<sup>16</sup> Nancy Boyd, *Emissaries: The Overseas Work of the American YWCA, 1895–1970*, (New York: Woman’s Press, 1986), 81.

<sup>17</sup> Louise H. Hunter, *Buddhism in Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1971), 33; Tamura, *Americanization*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Hunter, *Buddhism in Hawaii*, 56, 95.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>20</sup> Tamura, *Americanization*, 61.

<sup>21</sup> Hunter, *Buddhism in Hawaii*, 90.

<sup>22</sup> Tamura, *Americanization*, 146–49.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 154–58.

<sup>24</sup> Tamura’s assessment that “Americanizers . . . sought to strip immigrants of their native customs” does not appear to have considered the influence of the national YWCA; *Americanization*, 52, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Raymond A. Mohl, “Cultural Pluralism in Immigrant Education: The YWCA’s International Institutes, 1910–1940,” in Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt, eds., *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 114–15.

<sup>26</sup> Mohl, “Cultural Pluralism,” 115.

<sup>27</sup> James Leiby, *A History of Social Welfare and Social Work in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 133.

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth E. Reid, *From Character Building to Social Treatment: The History of the Use of Groups in Social Work* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), xiii.

<sup>29</sup> *The Girl Reserve Movement: A Manual for Advisers* (New York: Woman’s Press, 1921), 41.

<sup>30</sup> Gertrude Gogin, “Report to the City Committee, January 10 to March 10, 1919,” University of Hawaii, Hamilton Library, microfilm D00036, reel 1.

<sup>31</sup> The YWCA’s organization for young working women followed along similar lines to that of the Girl Reserves but was not referred to as such.

<sup>32</sup> Marie Elliott, “Girl Reserve Club Report, November 15–March 15, 1921,” YWCA Oahu Archives.

<sup>33</sup> Grace Stockwell, “Club Report, January 15–February 15, 1921,” YWCA Oahu Archives.

<sup>34</sup> “Our Objective—Girls!,” *The Friend*, March 1921; Alice Moore, “Club Report, November 15–December 15, 1920,” YWCA Oahu Archives.

<sup>35</sup> Catherine S. Vance, *The Girl Reserve Movement of the YWCA* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1937), 74.

<sup>36</sup> Alice Moore, “Club Report, 1920,” YWCA Oahu Archives.

<sup>37</sup> *Girl Reserve Movement*, 295.

<sup>38</sup> Girl Reserve Department, “Annual Report, 1930,” YWCA Oahu Archives.

<sup>39</sup> Girl Reserve Department, “Annual Report, 1931,” YWCA Oahu Archives.

<sup>40</sup> Anne Soon Choi, “‘Hawaii Has Been My America’: Generation, Gender, and Korean Immigrant Experience in Hawaii Before World War II,” *American Studies* 45, no. 3, (2004): 141–44.

<sup>41</sup> Girl Reserve Rural Work, “Annual Report, 1932,” YWCA Oahu Archives.

<sup>42</sup> Gertrude Gogin, “Report to the City Committee,” 1919.

<sup>43</sup> Mary Frederickson, “Citizens for Democracy: The Industrial Programs of the YWCA,” in Joyce L. Kornbluh and Mary Frederickson, eds., *Sisterhood and Solidarity: Workers’ Education for Women, 1914–1984* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 78.

<sup>44</sup> Mary S. Sims, *The YWCA: An Unfolding Purpose* (New York: Woman’s Press, 1950), 78.

<sup>45</sup> Grace H. Wilson, *The Religious and Educational Philosophy of the Young Women’s Christian Association* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia

University, 1933), 86.

<sup>46</sup> Boyd, *Emissaries*, 78–79.

<sup>47</sup> “Minutes of the Board of Directors,” February 17, 1920, YWCA Oahu Archives.

<sup>48</sup> *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, February 5, 1916.

<sup>49</sup> *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, April 15, 1916.

<sup>50</sup> Grace Potter, “YWCA Club Report, February 1920,” YWCA Oahu Archives.

<sup>51</sup> Grace Potter, “YWCA Club Report, April 1920,” YWCA Oahu Archives.

<sup>52</sup> *The Friend*, March 1921.

<sup>53</sup> *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, February 9, 1924.

<sup>54</sup> “Annual Reports of the Honolulu YWCA,” 1930, 1931, 1932, YWCA Oahu Archives.

<sup>55</sup> Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, 258–59.

<sup>56</sup> Sheila Rothman quoted in the introduction to Elizabeth Wilson, *Fifty Years of Association Work among Young Women* (1917; repr., Farmingdale, NY: Dabor Social Science Publications, 1978).

<sup>57</sup> Lynn Y. Weiner, *From Working Girl to Working Mother: The Female Labor Force in the United States, 1820–1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 64.

<sup>58</sup> *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, January 19, 1935.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Jane Dranga, “Racial Factors in the Employment of Women,” *Social Process in Hawaii* 2 (1936): 12.

<sup>61</sup> *Honolulu Advertiser*, January 29, 1938; “Minutes of the Annual Meeting,” January 28, 1938.

<sup>62</sup> *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, May 29, 1938.

<sup>63</sup> Arthur Power Dudden, *The American Pacific: From the Old China Trade to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 69.