SSHA 2023 Abstract

Maye Henning

In 1898, the U.S. government annexed the Hawaiian islands and soon after passed a law granting collective citizenship. This paper investigates how the acquisition of Hawai'i marked an important transition from settler colonialism to overseas empire for the U.S. and enabled both conquest and opportunities for native resistance.

As the U.S. expanded westwards across the North American continent, a pattern of incorporation emerged. White settlers took over the lands, and once a sizeable white population was established, the lands became states and the settlers U.S. citizens. By 1898, the U.S. had settled the west and begun to expand overseas. As it acquired overseas lands, including Puerto Rico and Guam, American officials developed an alternative model of expansion, not based on citizenship and statehood but on semi-sovereignty. The newly acquired islands would not become states, yet would remain under U.S. control for over a century.

Hawai'i marks a critical juncture in the transition from settler colonialism to overseas empire. During the late 19th and early 20th century, U.S. officials were confronted with choices about how to island acquisitions and how these acquisitions would conform or break from the existing model of state building, predicated on settlement and statehood. Questions arose about the benefits of territorial control and the assimilability of overseas populations.

The U.S. would eventually grant collective citizenship to Hawai'i in 1900 and then statehood 1959, but incorporation was far from a foregone conclusion. In this paper, I explore

how the U.S. made decisions about citizenship and statehood, and in part, paved the way for later U.S. territories. Finally, for many years before and after its acquisition, native Hawaiians opposed U.S. rule and U.S. citizenship. Yet in the aftermath of annexation, native Hawaiians turned their U.S. citizenship into a form of political power to resist U.S. colonialism. These insights shed light on how the U.S. expands and governs its territory and speak to ongoing questions of membership and belonging.