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Paper Title “Revisiting the Picture Bride: Reproductive Labor and Ethnic Community in Hawai’I”

The picture bride persists as an icon of normative ethnic femininity in cultural studies of communities of Asian descent in Hawai’I. The picture bride is seen as a figure that enables Asian/Pacific American community, particularly its successful rooting as an intricately ethnicized and emphatically gendered formation in plantation Hawai’I. Her civilizing burden allows her work to be recuperated as spontaneous heroic culture. This relationship not only overwrites the particular tensions of its production, but also disappears her paid and unpaid reproductive labor. Instead, there arises, in many social histories, an ahistorical veneration of the use of her labor to create a nascent Asian/Pacific American culture.

This paper serves as an intervention in the dominant formation of the picture bride. It attends to different narrations of migrant community formation in plantation Hawai’I through the lens of domestic and care work from women. I study the extraction of these labors to expose the calibrations of imperial design as well as the roots of a coordinated patriarchal and class violence. I examine cultural forms that refuse the boundaries set by social historians as “compositional conditions”. These cultural forms are: hole hole bushi, or early 20th-century field songs by Asian women plantation workers; current social histories of picture brides; and short stories by one contemporary Local writer, Marie Hara.

Ultimately this study centers domestic work (and displaces the picture bride, its ghostly embodiment) to understand the achievement of normative masculinity and femininity. I see this achievement not as a forgone ideological effect, but as the consolidation of contested labor practices in one local context. I conclude by understanding Local identity as an important site of contestation, given the term’s increasing recognition as one node of a globally orchestrated capital system. If we understand the local and the global as mutually constitutive terms, the Local can help to map how the global establishes itself in particular strategic regions; and specifically, how imperial and patriarchal processes continue to organize Hawai’I. This type of grid work depends on a recognition of the constitutive presence of paid and unpaid reproductive labor.