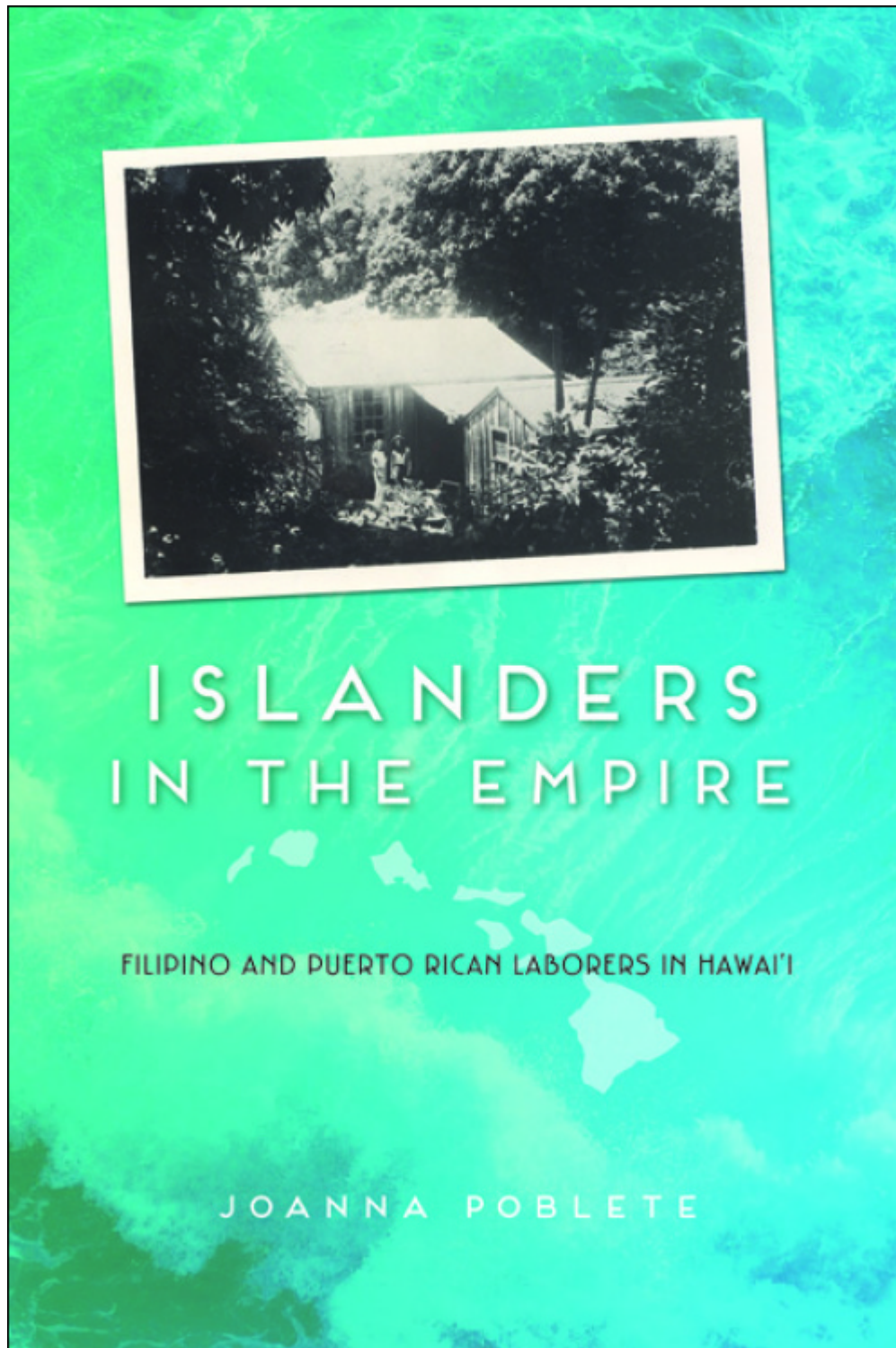


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Islanders in the Empire: Filipino and Puerto Rican Laborers in Hawai'i



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Reviewed Work(s)

Islanders in the Empire: Filipino and Puerto Rican Laborers in Hawai'i.
By Joanna Poblete (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014). Pp. 227.
Cloth, \$55.00.

In the final years of the nineteenth century, the United States conquered far-flung territories all over the globe. These included Hawai'i, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Guam, and parts of Sāmoa. Many historians have written of the rise of U.S. empire and the divergent paths of each American colony: Hawai'i became a state; Puerto Rico a commonwealth; the Philippines achieved independence; Guam and Sāmoa remain non-self-governing territories, in violation of the United Nations. JoAnna Poblete's excellent *Islanders in the Empire* takes a different tack, focusing not on U.S. empire itself or on any colony in particular, but rather on the movement of laborers *between* colonies. The "intra-colonial" (6) movement of Puerto Rican and Filipino migrant workers to Hawai'i positioned these peoples in a socio-legal limbo somewhere between "foreigner" and "citizen" (1-2). Poblete calls this status "U.S. Colonial"; these were migrants who lived neither in the colony proper nor in the metropole but rather in another colony. Through "open colonial mobility" (3-4), migrant workers took advantage of the lack of restrictions on movement between American territories. Poblete argues that migrant labor created "intra-colonial" spaces that were less harsh than the conditions faced back at home or on the U.S. mainland.

Islanders in the Empire is divided into six chapters. Chapters one and two narrate histories of labor recruitment and labor migration to Hawai'i. Chapters three and four analyze workers' complaints over labor conditions. Chapters five and six look at the labor mediators and community liaisons who rose to prominence within these ethnic groups. Due to a lack of contact and cooperation between Puerto Rican and Filipino workers in Hawai'i (94), Poblete offers a comparative rather than intersectional history, treating each ethnic group in turn: chapters one, three, and six concern Puerto Ricans; chapters two, four, and five Filipinos. In her analysis of these two groups, Poblete finds that Filipino migrant workers generally relied upon stronger advocates and had more diverse paths to power and resistance on and off the plantations than did Puerto Ricans. The difference in numbers proved important: in the period between 1900 and 1946, only five to six thousand Puerto Ricans came to Hawai'i; by contrast, nearly 126,000 Filipinos arrived in the archipelago.

One of the major contributions of this book is Poblete's illumination of transnational (7) and trans-local (70) relationships among people in multiple peripheries. Puerto Rican migrant workers in Hawai'i, for example, relied upon Spanish-language newspapers published in Puerto Rico to raise awareness of their sufferings. Filipino migrant workers pressured the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association (HSPA) to fund return migration to the Philippines and to finance the relocation of family members to Hawai'i. Puerto Rican workers, lacking an advocate in the Pacific, deserted plantations for California and other parts of the empire, proving that working-class mobility was a form of power and a means of resistance (88-93). Indeed, within just two years, as many as 37% of all Puerto Rican workers in Hawai'i had deserted their plantations. "Open colonial mobility" allowed Filipino and Puerto Rican migrants to move their bodies in ways that frustrated the attempts of sugar planters and government officials to discipline their labor.

Poblete has written an important work of "socio-legal labor history" (5). As such, she emphasizes bureaucratic and hierarchical processes of labor management and meditation rather than focusing on workers' experiences. Poblete introduces the reader to a host of "ethnic leaders" including labor commissioners, Filipino Protestant ministers, and Puerto Rican businessmen; these fascinating portraits demonstrate the class antagonisms that festered within migrant communities. What is missing, however, is a more nuanced social history of the lives and labors of the tens of thousands of migrant workers themselves. Future research may wish to dig deeper into the cane fields to answer questions such as: How did the Filipino and Puerto Rican experience of sugar production in Hawai'i compare to that in their home countries? How was the transnational experience of Hawai'i mediated not only by the circulation of words and remittances but also by diet, climate, health, gender, and ecology? How did Puerto Rican and Filipino workers interact with Chinese, Japanese, and Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) laborers in the islands?

In the book's conclusion, Poblete argues that American historians need to take empire and colonialism more seriously. By focusing on periphery-to-periphery labor migration within the empire, Poblete has done just that. *Islanders in the Empire* pairs well with similar scholarship on intra-colonial movement within the British empire as well as recent work in

postcolonial studies and transnational labor history. Readers interested in migration and diaspora studies will also find much of interest in this captivating new study. That Puerto Ricans, Hawaiians, Sāmoans, Chamorros, and other colonized peoples continue to move and migrate throughout U.S. empire makes this study not only historiographically significant but also contemporarily relevant.

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