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Review of *Pineapple Culture: A History of the Tropical and Temperate Zones*  

By Alan Rosenfeld  

For local residents and pineapple eaters alike, the closure of Maui Pineapple Company--the state's largest pineapple grower--following the 2009 harvest hails the definitive end of an era in Hawaiian history when sugar was king and pineapple was, at the very least, a belligerent prince.¹ Gary Okihiro's *Pineapple Culture: A History of the Tropical and Temperate Zones* deftly traces the crop's ascent to the apex of the global commodity circuit, as the "infiltration of the tropics spread to virtually every home and homemaker in the United States" and beyond (180). Rather than viewing this journey as a triumph of innovation and toil, Okihiro weaves a tale dominated by privilege, hierarchies of power, and exploitation. In doing so, he reminds us that the "development of the core was purchased with the underdevelopment of the periphery, with deadly consequences for native peoples" (178). Readers will be pleased to see that *Pineapple Culture* is hardly a kitschy and cursory overview of a delightful fruit, but actually a critical examination of pineapple's junctures with imperial expansion, consumerism, middle-class growth, and the emergence of the modern advertising industry.  

Those familiar with Alfred Crosby's seminal work, *Ecological Imperialism*, will recognize the hues of biological expansion outlined in Okihiro's opening two chapters on "Mapping Desires" and "Empire's Tropics." Beginning with a brief historiography of European conceptions of the relation of climate to human temperament, the author quickly progresses from Hippocrates and the ancient Greeks through Social Darwinism and the rise of the modern eugenics movement. Okihiro argues that the age of European empire was propelled by "white desires for tropical products" (20) and sustained by a scientific discourse that coded the people of the tropics as

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complacent and lethargic, thereby providing a convenient moral imperative for "white management of the tropical band" (21). Of particular note for Okihiro is German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, whom he credits for inventing the very concept of the "tropics" as a simultaneous object of romantic desire and peril, but also as a site of untapped wealth awaiting European investment, development, and improvement (38). Indeed, Okihiro repeatedly probes the sinews linking European science to imperial expansion, arguing that the pleasure gardens of the European monarchs, "like museums and zoos, were the receptacles of empire," living manifestations of a European "desire to exert authority over foreign lands and resources" (41, 43).

In a somewhat abrupt transition, Pineapple Culture switches gears from a history of ideas to commodity-chain economics, as Okihiro employs the pineapple as a device for conducting a critical analysis of American imperialism. The author briefly traces the dramatic emergence of the United States as an imperial power in the world's tropical zones at the close of the nineteenth century, following its war against Spain and seizure of Puerto Rico, Cuba (from 1898 to 1902), the Philippines, Hawai‘i, Guam, and part of Samoa. He argues that these new overseas possessions provided Americans with a "seemingly benign representation of tropical splendor, abundance, and regeneration" as capitalist impulses became intertwined with a Christian moral imperative to uplift those perceived as "inferior, premodern peoples" (155-156). Although he acknowledges dissenting voices such as that of Mark Twain, the author takes American anti-imperialists to task, claiming that they "generally agreed upon the superiority of whites and inferiority of peoples of color" (56). Certainly, in the case of men like American Federation of Labor president Samuel Gompers, an anti-imperialist posture was rooted in nativist labor and business considerations rather than any sincere commitment to political self-determination for the peoples of the tropics.

Of all the newly-acquired tropical outposts of American imperialism, it is Hawai‘i that serves as the unwavering object of Okihiro's gaze, as he reveals how the island nation was "steadily drawn into a global network of empire and capitalism," with the most dire of consequences for its people (100). While Okihiro mentions that the acquisition of the Hawaiian Islands "anchored U.S. claims to the Pacific," he does not place American imperial expansion into a broader historical context by examining the simultaneous emergence of Germany (with New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Samoa, the Marshall Islands, and Saipan) and Japan (with Okinawa, Taiwan, and
Korea) as rival colonial powers in the Pacific. On the other hand, the author is quite convincing in establishing the American takeover of Hawai'i as anything but an uplifting experience, as he chronicles the arrival of swarms of American traders, who "created needs and stimulated desires," driving up the kingdom's foreign debt (98). Okihiro also emphasizes the role of New England missionaries, whose "doctrine of Christian capitalism" induced changes in land tenure and citizenship laws, resulting in a fifty-year land grab that saw a close-knit network of white families tighten their grip on the islands' natural resources, which laid the groundwork for the creation of a "plantation economy that dominated island life for almost a century" (105-109). The Hawaiian sugar boom, sustained by reciprocal trade agreements with the United States and the mass importation of "coolie" labor, boosted the value of American settlers' assets in the island kingdom to twenty-three million dollars by the early 1890s (128). The final dagger to the heart of Hawaiian sovereignty came in the form of the 1893 overthrow of Queen Lili'uokalani under the presence of U.S. marines, which was followed by a constitutional convention "boycotted by an overwhelming majority of Hawaiians" and a short-lived republic under Sanford B. Dole's leadership, before America's annexation of the island chain in 1898 (122).

It was Sanford's cousin, James Dole, however, who established Hawai'i as the global hub of pineapple cultivation and distribution, a rather serendipitous transformation given the fruit's likely origins in the Amazon basin of South America (74). Indeed, while it is possible that the pineapple's entrance into Hawai'i predated the arrival of the first Europeans, Okihiro points out that the fruit's Hawaiian name--hala kabiki, or "foreign pandanus"--hints at its overseas' origins (114). Although Europeans from Christopher Columbus's time onwards transported the pineapple across the Atlantic and beyond as "plunder and a prize of empire" (82), for centuries it remained a rare and exotic luxury in Europe, conveying "ostentation, wealth, power, and the worldliness of its proprietor" (165). Dole's breakthrough was to recognize the importance of the growing American middle-class as a potential market for pineapple and to successfully transform the former item of conspicuous consumption into an affordable canned convenience for "white middle-class women" (163).

While crediting James Dole for "carving out a market where virtually none had existed before," Okihiro attributes the American entrepreneur's success to his privileged access to capital and contacts rather than an industrious work ethic or remarkable business acumen (143). After arriving in Honolulu in 1900, the newly
minted Harvard graduate secured meetings with the directors of the Island's "Big Five" companies and began investing in local plantations, undoubtedly aided by the territorial governor – his cousin, Sanford B. Dole (130). Benefitfitting from an abundance of cheap land, access to immigrant labor, and the removal of import duties following the U.S. annexation of Hawai‘i, young James had little trouble convincing mainland investors to underwrite his fledgling Hawaiian Pineapple Company (132). In a fortuitous convergence of events, the American Can Company built a factory in Honolulu in 1906, allowing Dole's pineapples to infiltrate "every grocery store and home in America" (133). Aided by Dole's purchase of "virtually the entire island of Lana‘i," Hawai‘i was supplying more than eighty percent of the world's fresh and canned pineapple at the onset of the Second World War (151).

The author insightfully calls attention to the irony of the pineapple's conquest of the global market: although a product of advances in canning technology and a sophisticated marketing campaign, the key trait of the thoroughly modern "Hawaiian" pineapple was its ability to "represent an escape from the alienations of modernity" by transporting the consumer to its tropical paradise (3). In a tale reminiscent of today's advertising campaigns for milk and pork, Okihiro highlights James Dole's central role in the Hawaiian Pineapple Growers Association, which aggressively marketed the Amazonian fruit as a brand-free "generic" food item by linking it to "Hawai‘i's carefully crafted image of a lush, tropical paradise" (144). Decades later, with Hawaiian pineapple production outpaced by rival enterprises in Thailand, the Philippines, and Brazil, the author laments the enduring place the pineapple has come to occupy in the American and global imaginary. As he sees it, the once-exotic fruit has evolved into a "symbol of hospitality and generosity," a repository of a watered-down "aloha spirit" exploited by a profit-driven tourist industry that has "mocked Hawaiian dispossession and leied and embraced tourists in advertisements, brochures, and postcards" (176).

In short, Pineapple Culture, an ambitious work broad in scope, could serve as a useful pedagogical tool in a wide variety of courses. As assigned reading, it would be appropriate for upper-division or graduate seminars in world history, Hawai‘i-Pacific Studies, economic history, or American imperialism. More importantly, perhaps, as a valuable reservoir of lecture material, Okihiro's work is a prime example of the power of the commodity-chain approach to world history as both an explanatory tool and a device for piquing students' interest. Reminiscent of studies like The World That Trade
Created\textsuperscript{2} and \textit{From Silver to Cocaine},\textsuperscript{3} by tracing the pineapple's circuitous social life from an Amazonian curiosity to a canned supermarket convenience, \textit{Pineapple Culture} allows us to focus on transnational linkages and connections rather than reifying nationally-bounded narratives. Whether or not one agrees with all of the author's underlying assumptions about the politics of imperialism, Okihiro's book will surely make its readers rediscover the familiar and ordinary as something once again unfamiliar and extraordinary, helping us encourage students to question their surroundings from a more informed perspective.

\textsuperscript{2} Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, \textit{The World That Trade Created: Society, Culture and the World Economy, 1400 to the Present}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2006)

\textsuperscript{3} Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal and Zephyr Frank, eds., \textit{From Silver to Cocaine, Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500-2000} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). This title was reviewed in \textit{World History Connected} 4, no. 2 archived at \url{http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/4.2/br_cohen.html} (retrieved on December 10, 2009).