

Introduction

In an all too brief life and literary career, Wayne Edward Kaumualii Miller Westlake (1947–1984) produced a substantial body of poetry consisting of hundreds of short poems and longer narrative pieces.¹ He broke new ground as a concrete poet, translated Taoist classical literature and Japanese haiku, interwove perspectives from his Hawaiian heritage into his writing and art, and indefatigably published his poetry in small presses and anthologies in Hawai'i and abroad. When Westlake died in Hilo Hospital on February 16, 1984, at the age of 36, two weeks after his car was struck by an allegedly drunken driver, the only available collection of his poems was a 32-page, limited edition chapbook from an independently published small press.² Long overdue, *Westlake* showcases one of contemporary Hawai'i's most versatile poets.

In 2001, seventeen years after Westlake's death, his former partner and present literary executor, Mei-Li M. Siy, gathered and organized many of his manuscripts and papers, which had been lying for years in boxes, stored in a shed near her family home in Hawai'i. Receiving these unpublished poems and manuscripts from Mei-Li initiated a deeply emotional journey—for both of us—to document and honor his life and work.³ *Westlake* includes published and unpublished poetry, composed from the late 1960s to 1984, by one whose talents have yet to be fully appreciated and studied. This is a poet who worked and struggled in an era when few authors from Hawai'i, particularly those of Hawaiian ancestry, had access to established presses.

According to Wayne's brother Ward, their Hawaiian genealogical line flows from mother Elsa Marjorie Reichardt and maternal grandmother Jane Miller, originally from Maui. Elsa, who earned a master's degree from Columbia University, documented the brothers' genealogy that “goes back to the king of Kauai” [Kaumuali'i].⁴ Their German ancestry came from their father, Frank Raymond Westlake, formerly of Kaua'i.⁵ Ward believed that Wayne learned of his Hawaiian name while attending a private academy, Punahou School in Honolulu, when “they needed their Hawaiian

names for the Holokū Ball.” According to Ward, Kaumualii was Wayne’s given name, established from his mother’s research and validated by a family relative or close family friend. Wayne began including Kaumualii as part of his name in the mid-1970s when he initiated a letter-writing campaign addressing cultural issues and Hawaiian land struggles.

After his ashes were secreted near Kilauea in a ceremony organized by Mei-Li and two of his friends, Palikapu Dedman and Emmett Aluli, Wayne’s brothers and father held a second funeral at the Diamond Head Memorial Park. His memorial plaque reads “Wayne Edward Westlake.” Westlake used many pen names from as early as 1972: Kamalii Kahewai (for his unpublished series “Down on the Sidewalk in Waikiki”); Edward Kaumualii (in the periodical *Writer’s Ink*); Wayne Kaumualii Westlake; Wayne K. Westlake, and Wayne Westlake. Westlake once confided that his mother was initially perturbed by and had admonished him against using his “kapu name,” Kaumualii, in his editorials.⁶ Despite this, he refused either to yield or to shield his Hawaiian name; the cultural and political stakes were too high, especially regarding issues related to identity that he addressed during this last decade of his life.

Westlake was born in Lāhaina, Maui, in 1947 and his family moved to ‘Āina Haina, O‘ahu, when he was in elementary school. Later, all four brothers, William, Wayne, Ward, and Wendell, attended Punahou on athletic scholarships, and each excelled in football and other sports—their high school athletic achievements are well documented in Honolulu newspapers throughout the 1960s. Ward and several of Wayne’s childhood friends confirmed stories of Wayne’s athleticism, charisma, and rebelliousness. And while neither his friends nor Ward could remember Wayne ever revealing a high school interest in composing poetry, Ward felt that Wayne’s creativity probably started at Punahou, where he was always a “good student who played lots of sports” and nearly always earned “good grades.”⁷ Russell Kokubun, Wayne’s friend since elementary school, remembered that Wayne, in his youth, had earned a reputation as an artist. This talent would emerge in his concrete poetry, in various collages published in the literary magazine *Ramrod*, edited by Joe Balaz, and in sketches of threatened Hawaiian petroglyphs that he discovered on Kaho‘olawe when it was occupied and used as a target island by the U.S. military.

After graduating from Punahou in 1966, Westlake attended the University of Oregon and began, in earnest, his lifelong study of world litera-

tures. The earliest poems included in *Westlake* were compiled in Oregon, probably sometime shortly before or after he dropped out of college in 1969. He often spoke of a teacher and poet in Eugene who was affiliated with a group called “Yesterday’s Onion” and of another teacher who drew Westlake toward Asian languages, art and poetry, sake drinking, and tea. Bo Hunter, a close friend of Westlake’s from Hawai‘i who stayed with him in Eugene from December 1970 to May 1971, recalled that eventually Westlake could “go head to head with all of the professors of Chinese literature and philosophy there, quitting school after there were no more Asian literature or history classes to take.” Westlake’s transition from college student to college dropout in Oregon initiated a long period when he independently studied classical Chinese, poetry, philosophy, and all aspects of Taoism, as well as a plethora of world authors.⁸

An early poem (circa 1972) reveals Westlake incorporating aspects of Taoist philosophy into his own evolving Hawaiian aesthetic and political consciousness. He wrote:

taoist hawaiian

someone yells:

HEAD’S UP!—

i put my head

down

good thinking—eh?

In an ancient feudalistic war-torn China, philosophers Chuang Tzu, Mencius, Lao Tzu (4th century B.C.), and other Taoist poets, particularly of the T’ang dynasty (618 to 907 A.D.), informed Westlake of philosophies that aligned well with his Hawaiian traditions: “The Taoist wayfarers were heirs to several sources of most ancient knowledge: shamans who knew how to alter consciousness; curers who studied the properties of plants and minerals; diviners who studied the weather, the stars, the animals, and the balance of the environment as a whole . . . chieftains and courts of high antiquity who laid the groundwork of civilization; court scribes and historians, whose work confronted them daily with the moral and political lessons of the ages.”⁹ One of Westlake’s early translations of poet Han Shan (circa 8th century) evokes Taoist symbolism alluding to understanding and enlightenment:

Footprints of the Ancients left on thousand year-old stones
In front of ten-thousand cliffs—one spot empty
Here always the bright Moon shines pure and clear
Never bothering to ask East or West!¹⁰

In a short poem that appeared in the same issue featuring his Han Shan translations, Westlake declares: “East/I’m afraid/does not/meet West—/they COLLIDE!” Unlike poet Han Shan, East and West did matter to Westlake, particularly in the Pacific Islands region—with Oceania either caught in the middle of conflicts between East and West or forever relegated to a cultural and political periphery. Westlake had immersed himself in works spanning from Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* (circa 400–320 B.C.) to Mao Tse-tung’s *On Literature and Art* (1960), and he was, for example, well versed in strategies of war and insurgency that were effectively implemented by Mao Tse-tung against those who tried to destroy the Communists in their struggle to free China from foreign domination. Westlake’s nontraditional, primarily self-taught education in the literary arts focused on work far beyond any western literary canon. This background not only nurtured an eclectic aesthetic, but fully prepared him to adapt strategies and principles by which to write on behalf of not widely known or even unpopular Hawaiian- and Pacific Islands-related issues in the late 1970s and early 1980s—a Taoist Hawaiian, indeed.

Inspired by his readings and bolstered by antiwar movements in the U.S., Westlake would soon experience a harsh wake-up call. In the late 1960s, at the height of the Vietnam War, after he had dropped out of the University of Oregon and while he was still living in Eugene, Westlake’s draft notice arrived—unbeknownst to him—at his mother’s home in Hawai‘i. Ward recalled that his mother informed Wayne of its arrival, and after learning that her son was unequivocally opposed to the war, she “decided to support her son one-hundred percent.” Mrs. Elsa Westlake hired an attorney to help Wayne apply for conscientious objector status in Honolulu. Ward remembered that Wayne flew home, where he locked himself in his bedroom with “no food or water” and the only noise that came from the room was the sound of his typewriter—for three days. Wayne finally emerged with a lengthy statement that so impressed Elsa’s attorney that he offered to represent Wayne pro bono. Wayne was eventually granted conscientious objector status. Ironically, according to his friends from high

school, Westlake had excelled in the ROTC program that was mandatory for male sophomores and juniors at Punahou. In contrast, his experiences in Oregon had helped to draw a line between the study of war and war itself. The “art of war,” its stratagems and philosophies, particularly espoused by Sun Tzu, Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao Tse-tung, would remain with him for a lifetime and inform his poetry and political writings.

After spending nearly five years away from home, with only occasional trips back to Hawai‘i, Westlake returned for good in late 1971 or early 1972. Initially, he lived in his family home in ‘Āina Haina, back then a sleepy East Honolulu suburb, from which he walked to school and work, earning his income as a janitor in Waikikī while pursuing his B.A. in Chinese studies at the University of Hawai‘i.¹¹ He also spent time in Mānoa in the “temple,” a traditional Chinese shrine and annex within the family home of his childhood friend Myron Wong, an informal gathering place for a handful of Westlake’s closest companions from his middle and high school years. During the next decade, Westlake produced the bulk of his extant poems.

When I first met Westlake in late 1974 in Mānoa, O‘ahu, at a reception for a visiting poet, he was relaxed yet intense and gracious. He could be quiet and moody, but once engaged would grow animated and expansive. As I was five years his junior, there was much for me to learn from and admire about Westlake’s convictions, literary devotions, and life experiences. In 1975, we began teaching in the Poets in the Schools Program, and a year later, with mutual friends and colleagues, began collaborating on a literary magazine, *Seaweeds and Constructions*, published on a meager income but nurtured by a collective vision to integrate art and literature locally, regionally, and internationally.¹²

Westlake was also active in reading poetry, including his translations, and in promoting writing by locally born authors and students. His public readings were as diverse as his published works; on one occasion, he read Han Shan translations with poets Wing Tek Lum and Michael Among (a.k.a., “black dog”). In the mid-1970s, he read translations of Issa on KTUH-FM when Eric Chock and I moderated “Haku Mele o Hawai‘i.” When Westlake read from his Poets in the Schools student compilations, “Born Pidgin” and “Kahoolawe—Chants, Legends, Poems, Stories by Children of Maui,” he would easily make the transition from English to Pidgin (Hawai‘i Creole English) and back. His public appearances reflected the many personae of his wide-ranging poems, his voice clear, paced,

and voluminous. At times, he'd evoke a deadpan tone with his polemic satires or reveal raw, trembling emotion when speaking publicly about the conflicts he had with former board members of the Hawai'i Literary Arts Council or with others whom he felt were giving undue preference to authors from the U.S. continent at the expense of talented poets, artists, and musicians from Hawai'i.

Westlake engaged in conversations and maintained relationships on a variety of levels, and he moved comfortably in circles that rarely intersected—Pidgin-speaking coworkers, family members, peers, and professionals. He was generous to his friends and compassionate to others more needy than he, despite deriving his modest income mostly as a laborer—a janitor, a construction worker at various O'ahu job sites, and, for a long stint, a baggage handler for Continental Airlines. He was a big-wave body surfer and at one point trained to enter bodysurfing contests on O'ahu, but after much deliberation decided to surf only for enjoyment. Some of his poems document heady nights of carousing, drinking, and smoking, but as his manuscripts testify, he lived and breathed poetry, his hands never far from any available scrap of paper that he could scribble on.

From the mid-1970s, while working at Continental Airlines, Westlake used his limited travel benefits to fulfill his dream of visiting Asia, but his trips were brief, and as the Hawaiian sovereignty movement gained momentum, he became increasingly involved in issues that impacted Oceania. Despite elements of impartiality in some of his editorials, Westlake believed unequivocally in a separatist relationship regarding any future demarcations between Hawai'i and the United States. This period marked a time when he turned to journalism to draw attention to land struggles in Hawai'i, issues of sovereignty, and a nuclear-free Pacific.¹³ Early evidence of Westlake's editorial writing surfaced in two letters to the editor in 1968 and 1969; however, he published most of his articles and editorials in the late 1970s to early 1980s—in the daily papers *Honolulu Advertiser* and the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, in the independent news magazine *Hawaii Observer*, in *Pacific Islands Monthly*, Alu Like's *The Native Hawaiian*, the Socialist *Ka Huliau*, and Hilo's *Hawaii Tribune-Herald*.¹⁴

Teaching part-time in the Poets in the Schools program significantly shaped his perspectives, but the work was sporadic, averaging only 15 hours a week per school, perhaps at just three or four schools a year. In February 1977, two years after Westlake began teaching in the Poets in the

Schools program, George Helm, Hawaiian leader of the Protect Kaho‘olawe ‘Ohana, and his companion Kimo Mitchell mysteriously disappeared at sea. They and a surviving companion, Billy Mitchell (no relation to Kimo), had secretly landed on Kaho‘olawe in search of their friends, Walter Ritte and Richard Sawyer, Jr., who had spent two weeks eluding the U.S. Navy in protest and in defiance against the military, which was using the island as a bombing range.¹⁵ Ritte and Sawyer were arrested by the U.S. military on Kaho‘olawe in July 1977. Helm and Mitchell’s deaths and Ritte and Sawyer’s incarceration affected Westlake deeply, and soon afterward he compiled and self-published a collection of poems, “Kahoolawe—Chants, Legends, Poems, Stories by the Children of Maui,” written by elementary school students who were enrolled in his Poets in the Schools classes.¹⁶ A local printer donated paper, including cover stock; Mikihala (Ah Chan) Among typed the stencils; and Bob Matsuda, then director of the Nu‘uanu YMCA, where I worked part-time as a desk clerk on the swing shift, gave us permission to mimeograph copies in the administrative office on a predetermined weekend. Once they had been compiled, Westlake personally distributed copies to legislators at the State Capitol in 1977.¹⁷ Not only did he produce significant, creative indictments condemning the U.S. Navy’s bombardment of Kaho‘olawe, but in November 1977, as a reporter for the *Hawaii Observer*, he published a penetrating interview conducted with Hawaiian political prisoners Richard Sawyer and Walter Ritte, Jr. Both had been incarcerated since July 29 of that same year for occupying Kaho‘olawe while desperately struggling to protect the island from further desecration.¹⁸

On July 18, 1979, the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* announced that Westlake had discovered about 30 Hawaiian petroglyphs on the then target island of Kaho‘olawe, where he had spent ten days as a volunteer assisting in an archeological study with the Protect Kaho‘olawe ‘Ohana “searching the northeastern tip of the Island.” The reporter described Westlake’s concerns: “Westlake said the nature of the petroglyphs suggests that a civilization made that area its permanent home. “The petroglyphs tell stories, illustrate activities, document events and praise the gods. . . . They indicate habitation, civilization, culture and spirituality.” Westlake described to the reporter that “the petroglyphs were weathered, hard to see and crumbling from heat and salt air. They were so fragile, he said, that he didn’t dare try to make rubbings, but copied them in a series of sketches instead.”¹⁹ Westlake’s hand-drawn petroglyphs from Kaho‘olawe, as well as his research and theories regarding the significance of ancient Hawaiian rock carvings

and figures, would appear in various publications in Hawai'i and elsewhere. He also published images of Kaho'olawe's petroglyphs in his Poets in the Schools lesson plans.²⁰ Such action reflected a growing cultural and literary activism on Westlake's part, and he was determined to introduce, beyond mere tokenism, a significant body of Hawai'i's literature into the classroom. Toward that end, in 1980 Westlake and I cofounded a course for the Ethnic Studies Program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa that featured literatures produced by indigenous and nonindigenous authors, poets, composers, and playwrights from Hawai'i.²¹

Westlake once wrote, in *Haku Mele o Hawaii*, a Poets in the Schools publication, that "The role of the teacher is not so much to teach any particular subject, but to teach learning itself. By exciting the children's natural curiosity they will learn just about anything by themselves."²² His friends can still vividly recall seeing Westlake's slow-gesturing arms, his intensely serious face, with trembling lower lip and quivering hands, when he discussed his discoveries on Kaho'olawe as if the spirit of the land itself were speaking through him. For Westlake, his indigenous ancestors themselves were embodied within Kaho'olawe's endangered petroglyphs—ancient rock carvings that offered and needed protection, in perpetuity.

From the late 1970s to his death in 1984, Westlake's writing continued to bridge literary traditions as he expanded his reach beyond Hawai'i's shores. For example, he published—in Japan and Canada—English translations by the nineteenth-century haiku poet Issa. After "Manifesto" (for Concrete Poetry) and a corresponding new series of work were published in Hawai'i in 1979, he sought larger audiences for his concrete poems and, in an unusual move, convinced small-press editors to reprint these and other previously published poems in magazines and literary journals from San Francisco to New York to London to Madras.²³ Westlake's literary wayfaring reveals many routes, as he navigated through poetic forms and philosophies, reshaping his work, often exploring and experimenting with what he called "absurdism." In one of his letters, written from Volcano in 1981, he enclosed three poems about his dog, a German Shepard named Kona. "I expect that you might think this is ridiculous, writing poems about my dog but I'm an advocate of absurdism and writing poems about my dog in this day and age is absurdist at best . . . I've written three poems here: 'Sending My Dog to College' 'On Having An Intelligent Conversation with My Dog' and 'My Dog is Panting.' . . . Three more coming up: 'My Boy is a Coconut Boy' 'The Name of My Dog's Dog Food Is My Name.' . . . And maybe the

last one is ‘God is Dog Spelled Backwards.’”²⁴ Westlake’s “absurdism” flows throughout his work, his writing reflecting “everything” he observed that amused or struck him. This apprehension of the absurd connects seamlessly with the epigrammatic qualities of brief, reflective poems that he developed through his study of many literary masters.

Westlake was determined to gain recognition as a poet in his own lifetime, but like the personae within his work, he never took himself too seriously. Time and again, his efforts to publish his ever-growing stack of poetry manuscripts were set aside so he could help others publish and read publicly. He also devoted hours preparing for public testimony related to Hawaiian land struggles and controversies associated with the arts in Hawai‘i. Nor did his status as an outspoken contemporary native Hawaiian writer help him in his campaign against ignorance and the suppression of indigenous artists and authors by educators and publishers in Hawai‘i and elsewhere.²⁵ In a 1980 letter to the editor titled “Hawaiian Artists’ Plight,” he wrote:

Unfortunately, in the arts community of Hawaii, the missionary ideal still prevails. Like the missionaries, the government art “experts” have deeply ingrained in their souls the ludicrous belief that the art world of Hawaii is so backward and behind the times that artists from all over the world have a moral mission to bring the saving artistic light to us pagan artists of Hawaii. Their god of art lives in New York, Paris or Japan. And there is no other god of art but theirs.

Where that leaves us, the savage artists of Hawaii, is starving in the dark. Which incidentally, in our religion, is the naked source of all life, light and art.²⁶

Westlake had reached a crossroads. In 1981, he and his companion Mei-Li M. Siy moved to the island of Hawai‘i. Westlake’s creative output slowed considerably as he devoted substantial time to researching and testifying against geothermal development in Puna and against a hotly contested proposal to build a rocket and satellite launching facility in Ka‘ū. He and Mei-Li finally settled in a modest house located in an isolated rain forest on Jade Street, only a few miles from the 1983 eruption that continues to flow to this day.

In 1983, with encouragement and support from Marjorie Tuainekore Crocombe, Subramani and Albert Wendt who, at the time, were teaching

at the University of the South Pacific (Fiji campus), we coproduced our seventh and last issue of *Seaweeds and Constructions*.²⁷ This final issue, *A Pacific Islands Collection*, anthologized previously published authors from Oceania and juxtaposed their writing with work by artists from Hawai‘i, a collaboration that would eventually lead to unprecedented networking between indigenous artists and authors of Hawai‘i and their counterparts throughout Oceania. A year later, Westlake was dead. Devastated, the main circle of writers and artists involved in producing *Seaweeds and Constructions* ended the series after a final 1984 reprinting of this same issue, dedicated to his memory.²⁸

While memories of Westlake continue to elicit tears, laughter, and warm head-shaking smiles among his friends and companions, *Westlake* revives, for a wider audience, the expansive spirit of the man who lives within his poems, chronicling an inventive poetic journey significantly infused by a wide-ranging passion for world and indigenous literatures. Assuming many poetic personae, always resisting naïveté, vanity, and injustice, Westlake’s reflections are as diverse as Hawai‘i’s multiethnic populations yet are always grounded in his intense commitment to the land and culture of his native Hawaiian ancestors.

Prepare to be provoked!

Richard Hamasaki
Kāne‘ohe, 2007