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# Offshore

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

OFFSHORE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Laurel Nakanishi

2017

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Laurel Nakanishi, and entitled Offshore, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Campbell McGrath

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Ana Luszczynska

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Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 20, 2017

The thesis of Laurel Nakanishi is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

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Andrés G. Gil  
Vice President for Research and Economic Development  
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2017

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“A Private Wild” – Orion Magazine, Pushcart Nominee

“When My Mother Was a Girl in Montana” – So to Speak Magazine

“Montana Suite” – Gravel Magazine

“The Sun Moving Across This Particular Earth” – Montana Natural History Magazine

“Correspondence: Self Portrait in Nicaragua with Egret” – Sinister Wisdom Journal

“Correspondence: Nicaragua, a Return to the Closet” – Sinister Wisdom Journal

“Rivers and Borders” – Wayward Post

“Seasons in School” – Who Speaks for Justice? Raising Our Voices in the Noise of Hegemony Anthology

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

OFFSHORE

by

Laurel Nakanishi

Florida International University, 2017

Miami, Florida

Professor Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

OFFSHORE is a collection of lyric essays that examines the intersections between human cultures and the natural world. The essays inspect issues of identity and belonging in different geographic, cultural, and political landscapes. Part one of the book centers on the cultural and natural landscapes of Hawaii and Japan. Part two explores interpersonal relationships in Montana. And part three focuses on social justice issues in Nicaragua and Florida. Each of the essays in this collection balances intellectual exploration with personal narrative and poetic description, allowing the essays to be simultaneously concept-driven while maintaining lyric force.

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## KA'AHUPAHAU

The boys said, “Come see,” and ran down the beach. In a shallow pool scooped into the sand and lined with blue tarp, there was a baby hammerhead. It was no bigger than my arm, but perfect: its fins beveled like an airplane wing, fading light grey to white. It lashed its tail through the warm water, gills panting. From each side of its strange, T-shaped head, an eye peered at us. I felt guilty next to those whooping boys, as if I was the one who caught it. Kept it.

*I wade in. Water swirls around my ankles and draws back again. I feel the tourists watching me, idly from under their beach umbrellas. The air smells like sunscreen and piña coladas and the wax I just rubbed onto my surfboard. I take a step and feel the sand give under my weight. With the next wave, the sand wraps around my feet, drawing me down and away.*

In a church play, my mother debuted as Mother Ocean and I, an *api*-fish hiding behind her skirts. I was too shy to do more than stick out my hand to wave a fish puppet frenetically at the audience. She gave a monologue about ocean pollution and sea-life ecology. Her blue skirt was pinned with stuffed plush turtles, felt octopi, and real seaweed that had begun to dry and stink like cuttlefish jerky.

*From here, the waves look small: white lines fading into a blue canvas. When I was a child, I thought they were sea animals – great ruffling heads with the texture of bunched*

*yarn. There is little whitewater at the shore break, and I can see down to the ledges of sandstone and algae as I wade out to my hips and then waist. I let my board float beside me: beryl-colored and yellowing with too much sun.*

The story goes they were sunbathing – my mother and her girlfriends, all in their twenties tied up in bikinis on Bellow’s Beach. Maybe they snuck on, or maybe they flirted with the Navy Base guards. The beach was quiet; the water paled as it met the sand. Then, a spout, frothing – as if a large tail were moving just under the surface. Then tanks surfaced, amphibious, opening their jaws. My mother groped for her towel and sunscreen as the young men poured onto the beach. They marched through the breakwater. They crawled on their bellies.

“You know the meaning of *hewa*? For me, the *hewa* is when the United States landed troops here without permission, on the pretense that they were going to watch over the Americans that were living here. . . . They were here to harass the Queen. . . . So, the *hewa* was when they landed the troops. They are still here, illegally occupying Hawaii.”

I went to elementary school on Hickam Air Force Base. During the Gulf War, we were all on red alert. There were guards at the driveway, at the playground, at the school doors. Our class made photo IDs with cutouts of astronauts, our faces in the bubble helmets. It was cute. We showed them to the soldiers.

“At a signal from the principal, the pupils, in ordered ranks, hands to the side, face the Flag. Another signal is given: every pupil gives the Flag the military salute –”

*Somehow they have cemented a pole to a rock in the bay. At night, soldiers swim out and raise little American flags. I paddle by, but today the pole is empty. Someone must be taking the flags down. Or maybe the wind has unraveled them.*

The water left sharp white crystals where it dried, where the waves flung themselves against the lava rock. There were pools with orange algae. Pools with sand skippers. Pools crowded with snail cone shells. Pools deep enough to jump in. We jumped in.

Striped purple and circling a darker core, I found a reef polyp. Or was it a tiny shell? Or the chipped arm of a sea urchin polished in the thrash of surf. And was the urchin still out there? Its blunt spine waving with the others from some crevice?

*I cross from reef to channel. The water turns deep cobalt, and I can no longer see to the bottom. My strokes are steady, but I am not fast. I wonder how my board looks from below.*

When I was in fourth grade, a little boy was attacked by a tiger shark. He was my age, body boarding like I did each weekend. In the news that night, a beach-goer described how “his eyes rolled back in his head” before he died. In class the next day, my teacher explained that sharks don’t want to eat people; they would rather have fish or sea turtles –

their favorite food. She drew a picture of a body board from below complete with arms and legs that dangled from the sides. “Now what does this look like?” she asked. “A turtle!” we chorused, horrified.

“The guardian sharks of Pu’uloa [Pearl Harbor] were Ka’ahupahau and her brother Kahi’oka. Such guardian sharks, which inhabited the coastlines of all islands, were benevolent gods who were cared for and worshiped by the people and who aided fishermen, protected the life of the seas and drove away man-eating sharks.”

Auntie told us the story in a Sunday school room. In the old days, she said, the children were taught a chant. If they were ever lost at sea, if they ever saw a shark while swimming, they were taught to chant the god-shark’s name:

Ka’ahupahau –

Ka’ahupahau –

And she would come. She would scare away the bad sharks. She would bring the child to safety.

Before I learned how to swim, I was floating on my Minnie Mouse raft at Ala Moana beach. A gust of wind pushed me out of the shallows. I reached a toe down but didn’t feel the sand. “I can’t touch!” I screamed to my father, “I can’t touch!” But he was too far to hear. “Help me!” My brother just doggie-paddled around in circles. Then, a Japanese tourist appeared and dragged me to shore. I remember her pale face and how she spoke to me in soft, nonsensical words.

Auntie remembered swimming at the mouth of a stream. There was a rope, and the kids would swing out and over the water. Just as her brother launched his body over the stream, they saw a mammoth shape swimming up the current. He came sputtering to the surface with his leg rubbed raw. At home, they said that only sharkskin could have made the wound.

*I sit on my board, letting my legs dangle in the water. The surf break is empty. I look back at the island: Manoa cliffs just visible above the hotels. And to the west: ship yards, dry docks, and Pearl Harbor all blend into one grey mass at the foot of the Ko'olau mountains.*

“People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.”

The boys and I played this game with the ocean. We built castles along the shore and waited for the tide to come in. Then, we dug frantic ditches, devised elaborate levees. We scooped up what was left of the towers and ran down the beach, shouting, “We must, we must, we must save the castles.”

People sleep	“Under the Appropriation Act of 3 March 1901,
In their beds	Pearl Harbor
at night	was dredged to accommodate larger ships.