

Talking Story with the Archives

In 2018, I found something strange on the shelves of the New York Botanical Garden's Mertz Library: a scientific text that doubled as a personal scrapbook. In the fourth volume of *Flora Hawaiiensis* (1940), a seminal work by American botanist Otto Degener, I stumbled upon several intimate photographs of young Asian men, delicately pasted into the book's back cover (see figure 1). Alongside the photos, newspaper clippings attested to Degener's "ingenious" contributions to the knowledge of Hawaiian plants, despite the fact that he was "still a young man" who maintained a "bachelor kingdom" at his beach house on the island of O'ahu.¹

The mention of Degener's "bachelor kingdom" and the photographs of shirtless Asian men, posing for the camera at the beach or at Degener's home, were not surprising to me. I had been studying Degener as an example of a settler colonial scientist in Hawai'i and was familiar with his queer leanings. He was a New Yorker, educated at the Garden in the late 1920s, who built a sixty-year career in Hawai'i. With the crucial help of Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) collaborators, he became the foremost collector of Hawaiian plants and an early advocate for native plant conservation. Degener also collaborated with dozens of Asian men who lived in his home, accompanied him on

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1. Otto Degener, *Flora Hawaiiensis: The New Illustrated Flora of the Hawaiian Islands*, Book IV (Honolulu: O. Degener, 1946), call number: QK 472.66.D391, LuEsther T. Mertz Library, New York Botanical Garden, Bronx, New York; "Flora Hawaiiensis, or New Illustrated Flora of the Hawaiian Islands. Book IV. By Otto Degener, B.S., M.S., Waialua, Oahu, Territory of Hawaii," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, July 4, 1940; and E.H. Bryan Jr., "New Volume is Completed," *The Honolulu Advertiser*, July 14, 1940.



FIGURE 1. Emilio Ordóñez, a Filipino botanical illustrator and collector, ca. late 1930s–1940. This photograph was pasted into the back of a copy of *Flora Hawaiiensis* that Degener gifted to the New York Botanical Garden, presumably upon publication in the 1940s. Otto Degener, *Flora Hawaiiensis: The New Illustrated Flora of the Hawaiian Islands*, Book IV (Honolulu: O. Degener, 1946), call number: QK 472.66.D391, LuEsther T. Mertz Library, New York Botanical Garden, Bronx, New York. Photo: Author.

expeditions around the Hawaiian Islands and to North America, and exchanged homoerotic letters with him from afar. These Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Filipino men (or their parents or grandparents) were imported into the US Territory of Hawaii as indentured laborers on brutal sugar and pineapple plantations from the late nineteenth century onward, via the global “coolie” trade that fed the wealth of a white American plantocracy. Their lives countered dominant narratives about Degener, including those on view just downstairs from where I sat that day, where the Garden’s latest exhibition celebrated Degener with no mention of his nonwhite collaborators.²

What did surprise me was the careful placement of these photographs in an otherwise stodgy botanical text, in the library of one of the foremost botanical institutions in the world. What did it mean, I wondered, that these men’s individual stories—and bodies—were contaminating this scientific text? Their very presence (and the absence of any Kanaka Maoli collaborators) exposes the

2. *Georgia O’Keeffe: Visions of Hawai’i*, exhibition at the New York Botanical Garden, Bronx, New York, on view May 19–October 28, 2018.

local conditions of producing *Flora Hawaiiensis*: a settler colonial plantation society that capitalized on imported Asian labor, enforced American racial and sexual hierarchies, and sought to eliminate Kānaka Maoli, while drawing from Native knowledge and networks.³ The personal, and possibly the queer, disrupts several fictions: the text's disembodied, objective voice, Degener's claim to sole authorship, and the neatly cataloged shelves of the Garden's library.

These photographs also gesture toward the paradoxes of invisible labor. They represent the power relations and erasure that occurs when universalizing knowledge, yes, but they also evoke something deeply affective. They tell of asymmetrical relations between people who clearly knew each other intimately and cared for each other, across lines of race and class. Encountering the photographs was to recover the joy, adventure, and ambition that these men found through connection with Degener.⁴ Collecting and illustrating, remaining in touch with him for decades, many found modest success in the sciences and fine arts as a result.

I was also surprised by my own feelings. Despite separations across time, gender, and sexuality, I feel a resonance with these men. I see myself in them: born and raised in Hawai'i and curious about the wider world, seeking knowledge from what I now understand to be colonial institutions, training in a discipline of knowledge production, and gaining power and legitimacy via US empire. In these men, I see my father: a first-generation Chinese immigrant who studied and worked in the environmental sciences for decades in Hawai'i. He, and I, and these men—we have all been Asian settlers on Indigenous land who tied ourselves and our careers to colonial knowledge production. We have benefited from American occupation in certain ways, and yet felt the sharp pangs of racialization in our own ways.⁵ Both Chinese and white (with German roots and a NYBG Mellon Fellowship), I see myself in Degener, a German-American who studied and found patronage at the Garden, existing somewhere between Hawai'i and New York. These are the layers of being a mixed-race settler, a knowledge producer, of leaving space for the in-betweens while recognizing my own indelible complicity in it all. As Anna

3. J'Nese Williams, "Plantation Botany: Slavery and the Infrastructure of Government Science in the St. Vincent Botanic Gardens, 1765–1820s," *Ber. Wissenschaftsgesch* 44 (2021): 137–58.

4. Nguyen Tan Hoang, *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

5. Haunani-Kay Trask, "Settlers of Color and 'Immigrant' Hegemony: 'Locals' in Hawai'i," in *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai'i*, ed. Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Okamura (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

Tsing writes, “Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option.”⁶

In Hawaii, we use the phrase “talk story,” which means sharing informally, slowing down to explore ideas, experiences, and opinions together. Talking story claims no goal other than to relate to one another, to wander through each other’s lives and worlds for a moment—to affirm each other’s *being*; the story can have no answers.⁷ Not everything must be legible or made to be so. Rather, this story testifies to being between worlds, between covers in a book, taking up space in unexpected (and unintended-for-you) places, and embracing the contamination and intimacy that comes with this strange profession, where we talk story across oceans of time, often with the dead.

6. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 27.

7. Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 6.