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Recalling the Medieval: Stained Glass, Longboards, and Rain

Closing Remarks of the Executive Director for the
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August 4, 2017

In the American sport of baseball, when a manager is thrown out of the game for arguing with an umpire, he then has nothing left to lose, and often will then continue to argue for some time after. The broadcasters will then invariably note that the manager is now “going to get his money worth.” So, in my final ISAS conference as the outgoing Executive Director, I hope you will indulge me for seven or eight minutes in advance of the official business of the General Meeting, while I get my money’s worth.

Before I begin here, I want to acknowledge my own awareness of my unawareness. Every single one of us has blindspots - things we don’t even think about, or consider, no matter how well we might mean. The process of their revelation can be difficult, and even shocking. I’ve been surprised at discovering some of my own, and those of others, as current issues in our field of early medieval studies are raised, exposed, and debated. ISAS 2017, and the social media discussions just prior to this meeting have been vital in both discovering and raising awareness of some big ones.

As with all good academic conferences, I’ve learned about a phenomenal number of things this week, but at the University of Hawai'i the learning has been particularly pronounced. Here’s just one, though:

Forty-eight hours ago, as part of Wednesday’s mid-week excursion, we visited St. Andrew’s Cathedral. The medievalism of the structure is obvious.



The interior of Saint Andrew's Cathedral, Honolulu, HI. Creative Commons image in the public domain.

I'd like to briefly focus on one small, revealing detail of this cathedral, a pair of late nineteenth-century stained glass windows. I apologize for the quality of the photos - I took them on my phone, which is an ancient iPhone 4 - it's not even a 4S.

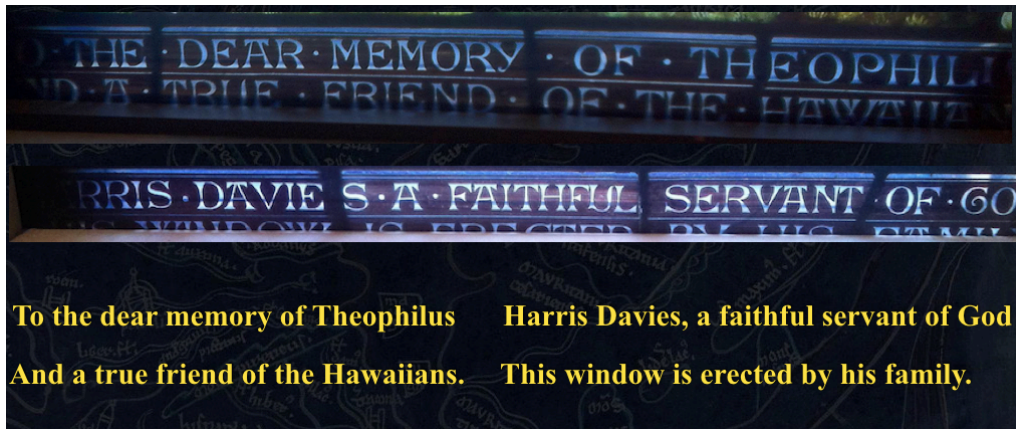
The left window depicts Moses coming down from Mount Sinai with the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, while the right window shows a scene from the end of chapter five of the Book of Joshua, where the angelic, beknighted Captain of the Lord's army appears before Joshua outside the walls of Jericho, before its walls came tumbling down, and the Israelites captured that city.



Stained glass panels in Saint Andrew's Cathedral, of Moses with the Ten Commandments, and Joshua and the captain of the Lord's army, before Jericho. Photo by the author.

I am not an art historian, but there is clearly a lot that could be said about these windows. Moses's face, for instance, is veiled, a detail perhaps borrowed from Islamic tradition, while on his head you can find vestiges of the apocryphal tradition of Moses's horns, here transformed into miniature shafts of light. I was extremely fortunate to have Jane Hawkes standing right next to me, to help take apart these scenes. I mean, how awesome is that?

Here is a constant in the long history of human existence: people being really horrible to other people culturally distinct from them, and convincing themselves of the opposite. Both of the scenes in these windows encode the violence and pain between peoples, but only in aestheticized modes meant to efface the reality of actual suffering. They actually perform such cultural work in two ways - in the Biblical narratives they depict, and in the nineteenth-century mythologizing of white, European colonizers.



Memorial inscription at the bottom of the stained glass panels. Photo by the author.

These windows are memorials to Theophilus Harris Davies, a British businessman who lived and worked in Hawai'i for more than thirty years before the downfall of the native Hawai'ian kingdom, and who afterwards from Great Britain continued to expand his businesses on the islands for years afterwards. They were paid for by his family, and position Davies as "a true friend of the Hawaiians."

"A true friend of the Hawaiians" - I haven't had time to dig deep into Davies' good works with regards to the Hawai'ian people - perhaps he was an significant industrialist-philanthropist in the nineteenth-century Carnegian mode, endowing orphanages and schools, and libraries. Before his death in 1898, Davies was also the guardian of Princess Ka'iulani while she completed her education in Europe; Ka'iulani was the final heir to the Hawai'ian crown, which she never inherited.

The Hawaiian Gazette
June 03, 1898

JUNE 3, 1898.—SEMI-WEEKLY


MR. T. H. DAVIES

Sad News of His Sudden Death
In England.

ALL WILL BE DEEPLY GRIEVED

Was Leading Citizen of Liberal and
Philanthropic Instincts—Was
Here Many Years.

The whole Island community will be
greatly surprised and more deeply
grieved to learn of the death of Theo.
H. Davies. The merchant prince and
philanthropist passed away very sud-
denly in England on May 21. Word



THEO H. DAVIES
(Photo by Williams.)

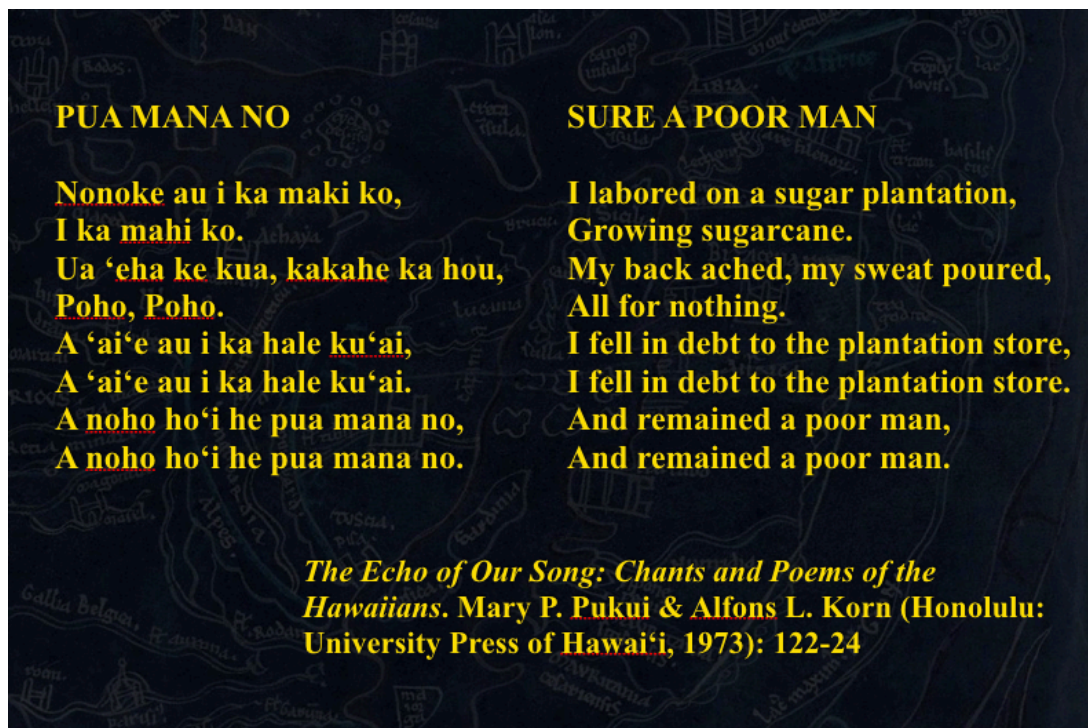
whom had for many years previously
been trusted associates. Mr. Davies
has lived in his native country almost
ever since. During his residence in
Honolulu, this gentleman by judicious
investments in sugar plantations, by
shrewd business management, and by
straightforward, honorable methods,
accumulated a large fortune, and did
much to develop the industry which is
now the country's main source of re-
venue.

Mr. Davies was a man of charitable
inclinations and philanthropic nature.
He has always contributed generously
to and devoted much personal effort
in the cause of Christianity, and to
the moral and social advancement of
the human family. His name is a re-
spected one throughout the Hawaiian
Islands.

Theophilus Harris Davies' obituary in the *Hawaiian Gazette*, June 3, 1898; emphasis by the author.

Davies' friendship to the Hawai'ian people is necessarily redefined once you examine the issues systemically - once you recontextualize cultural signifiers ascribed to him such as *gentleman, honorable, charitable, philanthropic, generously, moral*, and most importantly, *human*" (as found in his 1898 obituary in the *Hawaiian Gazette*) within the larger systems of power through which colonized people suffer and/or lose their identity, and by which colonizers are mythologized in the process.

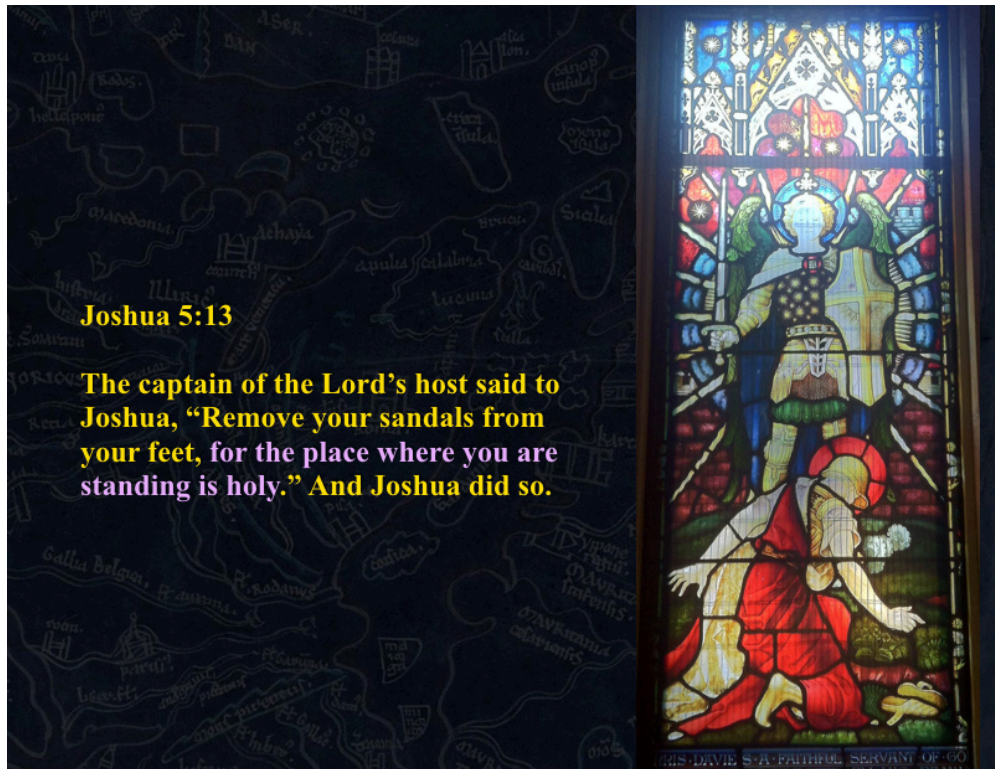
Davies was a sugar baron who, after the 1893 overthrow of the Hawai'ian Kingdom (an overthrow engineered by a cadre of American, British and German businessmen, with the end goal of becoming an American territory) reincorporated his business under the laws of the new provisional government as Theo H. Davies & Co., Limited, which then grew to become one of Hawai'i's famous "Big Five" sugar firms. The sugar plantations these firms ran exploited native Hawai'ian, and then immigrant Japanese, Chinese, South Sea Island, Puerto Rican and Korean populations, among others, for cheap contract labor that often equated to indentured servitude.¹



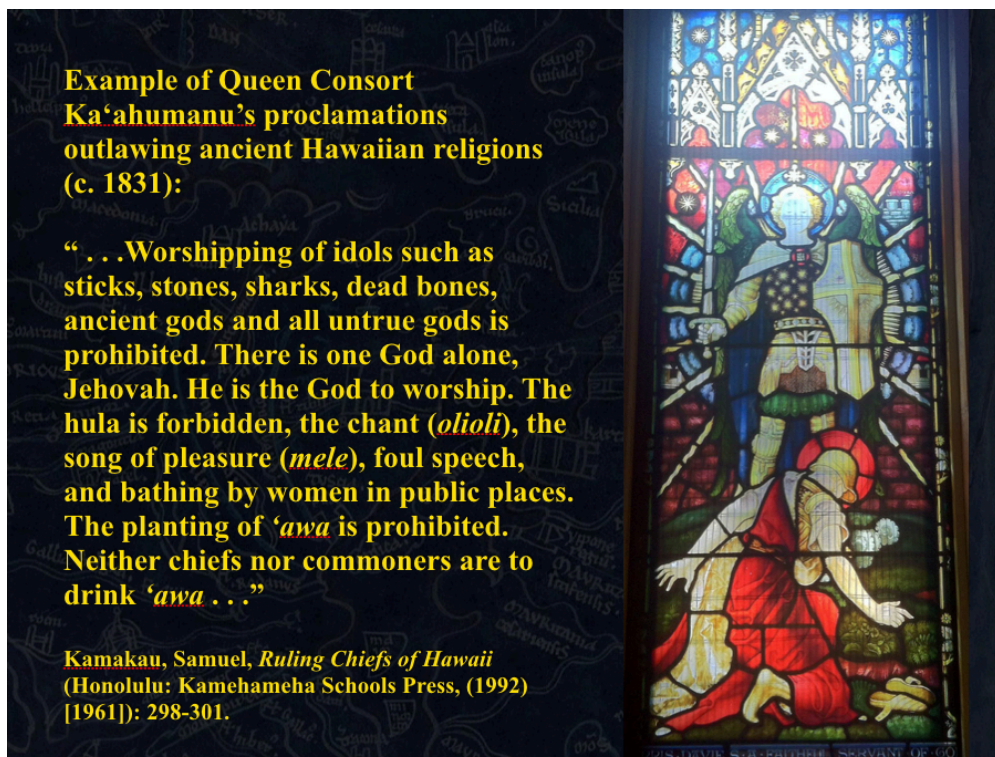
First stanza of "Pua Mana No," a nineteenth-century Hawaiian song about working on a sugar plantation

Looking on Wednesday at that stained glass representation of the scene at Jericho, I was thrown by the unambiguously medieval-inspired figure standing over a prostrate (and Roman garbed?) leader of the Israeli people. The iconographic associations beguiled me - how are we to read Theophilus Harris Davies in relation to this scene? As the humble servant of the Lord, as his family's dedicatory caption suggests? But, as with Moses in the other window - the mediator of God's authority and might - I am much more inclined to here locate Davies in the mythic figure of the winged medieval knight - the militarized agent of Christianity, fully of power and authority, bending a tribal leader to his will.

¹ For a concise history of sugar plantations and their working conditions, see the University of Hawai'i's *History of Labor in Hawai'i* <<https://www.hawaii.edu/uho/clear/home/HawaiiLaborHistory.html>>.



And then there is the “holy place” of the scriptural intertext that is the basis for this scene. Certainly, we can consider the intended holy, consecrated ground of St. Andrew’s Cathedral as this intended place. But this holy ground is supplemental, and represents the Western faith that tore down existing structures of faith, displaced native religions which were systematically diminished and then outlawed in the decades following Christian missionaries coming to Hawai’i in the nineteenth century – faith and culture righteously dismantled like they were the walls of Jericho. Juxtaposing a native, historicized intertext to this panel generates a powerful counter-interpretation for the scene.



I must acknowledge that this reading is brief and reductive –

Just before this talk I was discussing with a University of Hawai'i doctoral student the idea that royal Hawai'ian women also embraced Christianity in part because they sought liberate themselves from native power structures which oppressed them – I was reminded again of Bruno Latour's notion of irreducible complexity that has haunted me throughout the conference.

-- but I think it remains a necessarily emblematic one.

Its emblematic nature is why this medieval window matters: for Theophilus Harris Davies' identity, archived though his family for the future, it represents the sanctified, sanitized, hallowed, selective aestheticizing and mythologizing of his relationship to the Hawai'ian people and their past. In process it also reveals the disquieting and appropriative expressions of cultural authority and transformation - how one culture redefines another. In this one small example, we see how the processes of cultural hegemony and inequality use aspects of the medieval forms and expressions, bend them likewise to their service. It renders the medieval complicit in modern injustice. It renders any study of such medievalism that ignores this role as equally complicit.

People enacting violence on other people – literal, cultural and ideological – and convincing themselves otherwise is a part of what we study when we study the medieval past, and it needs to be a persistent aspect of how we consider the continuing use and reinvention of the medieval in our post-medieval world. It also needs to be a part of how we carefully examine our own selves, our own attitudes, actions, and responses to what we as medievalists see happening to and by the medieval in the present day. This is that stained glass window; and we are also that stained glass: always colored in our view of the medieval past within our own self-examinations of the present.

So. The disciplines of we have traditionally called Anglo-Saxon studies, and our own Society along with it need to self examine with a bit more clarity. I also need to acknowledge the distinction between fields and individuals here – to acknowledge work being done by individuals both inside and outside our disciplines working positively for positive changes within them. The field of our discipline, as broadly conceived and especially perceived, is being called to change in a number of ways, and that call needs to be answered, and it needs to be answered responsibly, and with sensitivity and generosity. I cannot stress this enough: *responsibility, sensitivity, generosity*. The external threats to what we do as scholars and teachers are far more ominous than the internal ones - as I can attest in my own country from the recent assaults on academic freedom in the sometimes less than great state of Wisconsin, and in the current U.S. administration's assault on public schools, and, most recently, in its direction to the U.S. Department of Justice to study how financial supports dedicated to minorities and peoples of color in American universities might be construed as depriving white people of an education.

As medievalists, we must build each other up, in positive ways, not tear each other down, nor attack and impugn others with whom we are already largely aligned with ideologically. We achieve less than we should when we allow the negative to drive our discourse. We strive for this ethic in the way we review and critique academic work; we should strive to do the same in all outlets of social - not just when we are in the same

room together. Let us *call each other in* to what we all need to do – not call each other out because we fear, or are unsatisfied by, the process of change. Academic fields change; it has always been that way. And we are on the cusp of big, necessary changes, because the world and cultures around us change. So the challenge as we consider the state of our field today, and this Society, is not to defend what our field has been in the past, but rather to imagine what we want this field to be in the future.

I must stress here to my international colleagues, because I have heard this comment on a number of occasions: this is not an American "thing" alone – neither inside our field or outside of it. The flashpoints of inequality of diversity and race and culture and gender may seem to burn brightest at this particular moment in the United States, but this is all of the world's problem, and as scholars, academics and intellectuals, we all have a role to play – if you think this doesn't involve you, please think again.

So I am putting this to everybody, but especially to those with the most privilege in our fields. We have a responsibility to move the field forward, and to do so as generously and supportively as we are able. For those in the field occupying places of privilege - when you encounter initiatives for change - think, very, very carefully, about what form and tone your first instinctive response to that possibility of change takes – that will tell you *a lot* about how much you truly understand about what is happening, and the role you play within the process. I have been struck, for example, by responses, largely by white men, to some initiatives for change. For instance, the recent controversy on social media over the decision of the organizers of the next International Congress on Medieval Studies to include options of pronoun selection on conference badges, and how, almost completely, it has been white men in the field who respond with trivializing humor to something that make them uncomfortable.² I know, #notallwhitemen, but we all need to be better about first being aware of and then checking our privilege. If a pronoun on a badge makes even one member of our field more comfortable, more welcome, how does that hurt you?



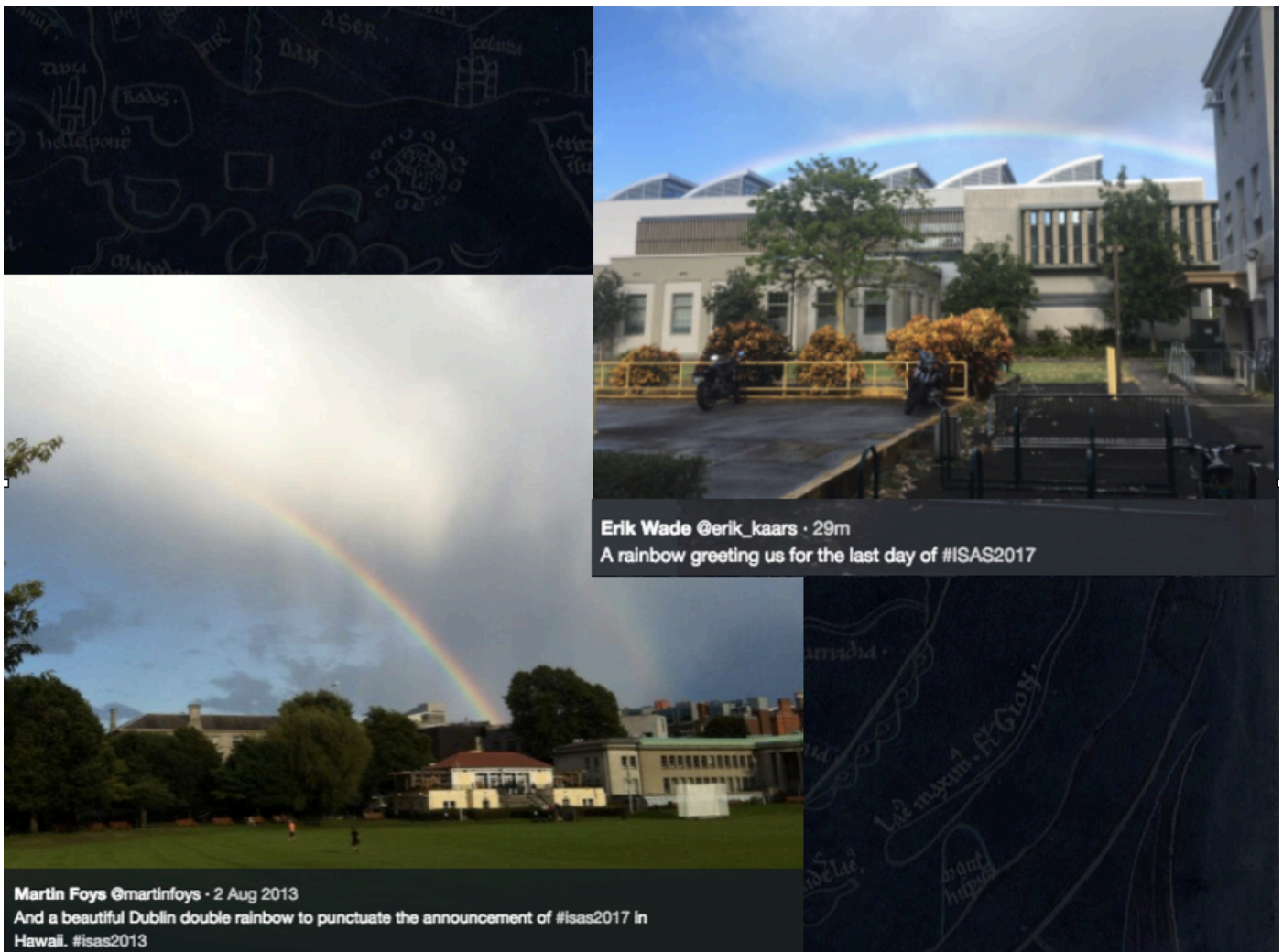
My longboard, resting on a banyan tree in Honolulu. Photo by the author.

² <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/220255454652480/permalink/1573505569327455/>>

So: longboarding. As some of you have seen, and probably joked about, I've been longboarding the three miles from my lodging to campus each day for the conference. It's good exercise. A longboard, for the uninitiated, is a longer, friendlier, middle-aged version of a skateboard. And the great thing about longboarding is that it's difficult to do if you are not centered, not confident.

Longboarding in a new place decenters you, takes you out of your comfort zone. This week, commuting on the unfamiliar streets of Honolulu was necessarily difficult as I learned the new terrain – reoriented myself to a changing landscape. At one point a fallen coconut took me out, which I am sure is symbolic of something here. In longboarding you have to adapt, you have to improve, if you want to keep moving yourself forward.

Longboarding into campus a few days ago, it began to rain, just a little. In the first moment of rain I thought, "I wish it wouldn't rain - I don't like to be rained on." Rain takes me out of my comfort zone – especially on a longboard. But as I kept skating, kept moving forward, I began thinking more carefully about rain and what it does: if this rain helps so many others in deep ways - giving life, allowing life, what's a little rain going to do to me? Not much, when compared to all the good that a little rain can do. So I say, let it rain. Let it rain all over the field we traditionally call Anglo-Saxon Studies, and let's see what new vitality, what new life, what new changes grow out of it.



Tweets of rainbows at ISAS-2013, Dublin, on the day ISAS-2017, Honolulu was announced, and at ISAS-2017, on the final day of the conference. Reproduced by permission of the authors.