

## Ward Village: A Linguistic Landscape of Contradictions

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### Abstract

Hawai'i sits at a unique linguistic intersection where many languages are used by various community stakeholders. This linguistic landscape examines Ward Village, a privately owned planned community in Honolulu. The goals of this analysis are to 1) more deeply understand how anti-conquest language perpetuates larger cultural narratives in this place, and 2) suggest how the linguistic landscape could benefit English Language Learners (ELLs). An ethnography was used with pictures taken to document signage choices. The paper finds that the Howard Hughes management company's use of Hawaiian language is largely ornamental, feigning community connection rather than embodying it through contextualized language use. The methods used to conduct this linguistic landscape analysis could also be used by ELLs to engage with their local neighborhoods more critically.

Ward Village is a planned community in Honolulu, Hawaii. It spans from Ala Moana Boulevard to Queen Street and Ward Avenue. The Ward Village master plan, spearheaded by the real estate development and management company Howard Hughes, was approved in 2009, and has been developed block-by-block since then. Howard Hughes is an American real estate development company with projects in Texas, Arizona, Nevada, Maryland, and Hawaii (Howard Hughes Holdings Inc., 2025). What follows is an analysis of the linguistic landscape of the Ward Village planning website and the physical space itself. Sociolinguistic concepts of anti-conquest and semiotics help shed light on the issues observed. This linguistic landscape analysis can serve as a model in language learning contexts to encourage students' exploration of their local linguistic environment and analyze how language is used to reinforce or question social structures in the physical world.

### Linguistic Landscapes

The idea of a linguistic landscape (LL) was popularized by a few studies in the 1980s, and then with Landry and Bourhuis's English language study of how linguistic landscapes affect ethnolinguistic identity among Canadian high school students (1997). Linguistic landscapes vary in scope and can encompass a variety of linguistic forms present in public space. While many attempts at definition have been made, Shohamy and Ben-Rafael (2015) state that the goal of a linguistic landscape is "to describe and identify systematic patterns of the presence and absence of languages in public spaces and to understand the motives, pressures, ideologies, reactions and decision-making of people regarding the creation of LL in its varied forms" (p. 1). This definition ensures that researchers are not limited in what can be included in the linguistic landscape; the focus remains on the presence and absence of language in public spaces.



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The language in question no longer has to be just written in nature, as it was defined in previous studies, but can also be multimodal or oral. Gorter and Cenoz describe linguistic landscapes as a “young and heterogeneous field...[that] constitutes a recognizable body of work with a focus on the visual representation of language in the broad sense” (2024, p. 13). The field is, therefore, also sometimes referred to as “semiotic landscapes” with reference to the broader images and architecture of a space, but both terms are used (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024, p. 14). The principles of linguistic landscapes have also been applied to online spaces, or “cyberscapes” (Ivkovic & Lotherington, 2009). The linguistic landscape analyzed in this paper also includes a cyberscape.

### **Anti-Conquest**

The term “anti-conquest” was coined by Mary Louise Pratt in 1992 when talking about travel writing. Herman (1999) later defines anti-conquest as a practice that “involves glorifying the Other at the same time that the Other is denied real power” (p. 77). This is perhaps most clearly seen in the case of Hawaii’s street names. Herman emphasizes how Western land division in the 1848 Mahele redefined how the land was conceptualized, and in many cases destroyed key geographic landmarks via conversion into plantation land. While using Hawaiian words as street names is seen by some as reconquest, or a reclamation of Hawaiian identity in public space, it still exists within a Western cultural framework that is punctuated by original name removals during the Mahele. In Herman’s words, “The decision to use Hawaiian words to name streets during the Territorial period, while at the same time closing Hawaiian-language schools...offers up a token of cultural respect at the same time that a linguistic and cultural purging was being enacted” (p. 92). This naming practice has been extended to buildings, so they, too, can bear Hawaiian names (Memminger (1997), cited in Herman, 1999). These names only pay superficial homage to Hawaiian culture for the purpose of creating a distinct cultural identity from the Mainland, which can be in turn sold back to the Mainland as the exotic “Other.” In this paper, I will analyze building names in Ward Village, as well as larger themes of anti-conquest present in the space.

### **Research Questions**

The analysis below is guided by two research questions:

1. How do the linguistic landscapes of Ward Village’s website and physical landscape communicate and reflect the social, economic, and political relationships of this urban area?
2. What do Ward Village’s semiotic choices reveal about its goals?

### **Methodology**

I used ethnography to make observations at the physical site and of its online presence. A total of 132 images were collected using an iPhone’s digital camera over multiple dates: 3/24, 3/31, and 4/21 in 2025. Together with images, I also noted the audioscapes of the places I visited. I spent a total of 4 hours at the physical site. In addition, I examined the official Ward Village website, [wardvillage.com](http://wardvillage.com). The images and website were analyzed using qualitative methods, with specific reference to top-down/bottom-up signage (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006), geosemiotics, a qualitative

framework for linguistic landscapes (Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2003), and anti-conquest (Herman, 1999). Top-down signage is signage posted in public spaces by public institutions, whereas bottom-up signage is created by commercial and private organizations (Jones & Themistocleous, 2022).

## Findings

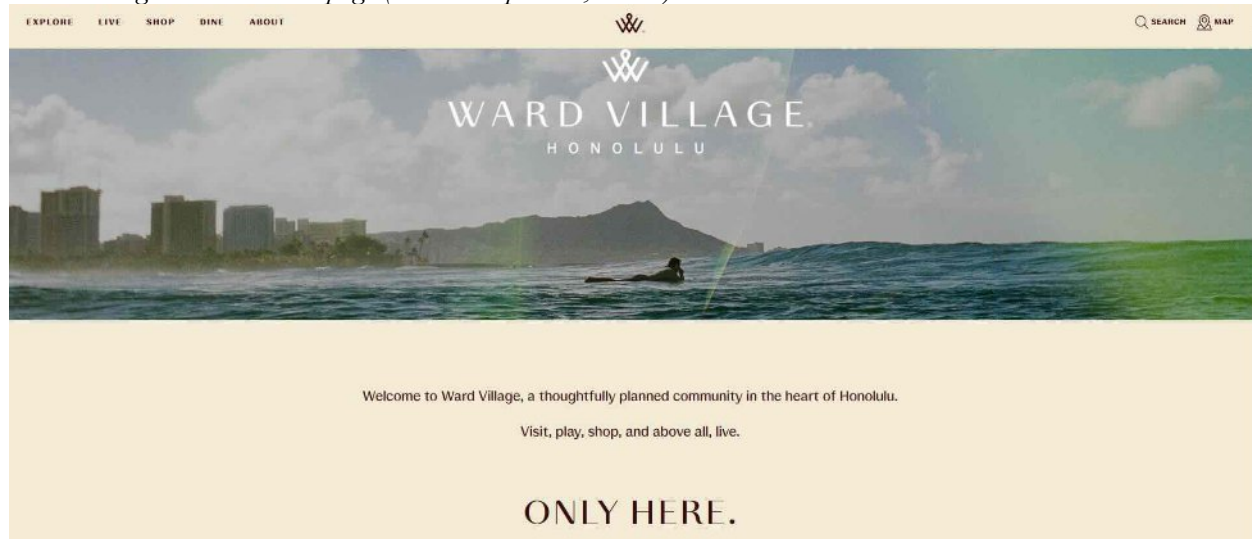
### Ward Village Cyberscape: Commodifying Local Life for Luxury Consumers

#### *Overall Webpage Presentation*

The Ward Village website utilizes white space and imagery to project a serene feeling while effectively erasing the contentious historical context that led to its privatization. Notably, the website does not have any languages other than English available to choose from, which implies a target audience of English speakers. The homepage features the Ward Village logo, a stylized “W” and “V” linked together, possibly resembling a wave, and an image of someone surfing, a popular cultural pastime, with the iconic Diamond Head (Le‘ahi) in the background. Below the image it says, “Welcome to Ward Village, a thoughtfully planned community in the heart of Honolulu. Visit, play, shop, and above all live.”, followed by, in all caps, “ONLY HERE” (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

*Ward Village Website Homepage (retrieved April 21, 2025)*



The use of “welcome” connotes an invitation to an outsider to join a central place, and in turn, the use of the word “community” implies a closely-linked group of people. Saying that Ward Village exists in the “heart” of Honolulu implies that Ward Village is an essential part of Honolulu. Beneath this first greeting is an invitation in the imperative form with a series of action verbs, most of them single-syllabic, “visit, play, shop, and above all, live.” The use of active verbs suggests that the activities are easily within reach. The variety of action verbs further suggests the multi-purpose nature of the place, with a lively and dynamic vibe. This message is reinforced by the tagline in capital letters, “ONLY HERE,” implying that the experience one has at Ward

Village cannot be replicated elsewhere, marking it as unique and exclusive. There are videos looping of scenic Honolulu skylines and racially ambiguous people, who look more Asian in general, enjoying drinks and lounging by pools. The images invoke a sense of relaxation and fun, for those who can afford the luxury.

Next, another page on the website is investigated. Under the “About” tab, there is a page called “175+ Years of History/Ward Family Legacy.” The website begins by acknowledging Victoria Ward as a “champion of Hawaii” who “graciously opened up her home for people to enjoy traditional gatherings, continuing the practices of Hawaiian arts, music, and language.” What follows is a timeline of the “Evolution of Ward Village,” which begins in the 1880s when Victoria Ward and her husband, Curtis, purchased 100 acres of land in the area. It is important to note that the timeline begins here, implying that there was no stewardship of the land by others before this time. The page does not mention that Victoria Ward was descended from Hawaiian *ali'i* (royalty), a close friend of Queen Lili'uokalani (Hawaii's last monarch until she was overthrown), nor that she signed the Hui Aloha Aina petition against annexation (HistoricHawaii, 2020). By omitting this information, Ward Village developers minimize Victoria Ward's connection to Hawaiian sovereignty.

The erasure of history in the narrative offered by the Ward Village website continues as it details how in 1930, Victoria Ward created Victoria Ward, Limited, a holdings company to “steward the land for the generations of Ward family members.” Various parcels were bought by the state and various investors over time, with the “Ward Center/Village” area being subsumed by Howard Hughes Incorporated, a mixed-use real estate development company, in 2010. This heavy focus on recent and Western transactions pushes the traditional Hawaiian land management system of ahupua'a further into non-existence. As for the future, the last paragraph discusses the goal of turning Ward Village into a “design-forward neighborhood for all,” and explicitly mentions “market homes and reserved housing for Hawai'i residents.” These statements make clear Ward Village's goal of at least appearing to cater to both mainland and local interests.

Also under the “About” tab is a “Commitment to Community” page that continues using anti-conquest rhetoric. This page features various community outreach programs. Most prominently featured is philanthropic giving to the Hawai'i Community Foundation, which is described as a “long-term partnership.” While they may have a long-term partnership with the Hawai'i Community Foundation, it is notable that HCF is a 501(c)(3) that services all of Hawai'i. This language suggests an ongoing commitment by Ward Village to give back to Hawai'i, but the nature of the “partnership” is not transparent, and the partnership is also removed from the physical land and immediate community that Ward Village occupies. There are also many pictures featured of other community events. This community aspect attempts to tell the viewer that by buying into Ward Village, they are buying into a neighborhood that is integrated with, rather than at odds with, the wider island community. While efforts to benefit the local community are certainly appreciated, and even somewhat tangible in their efforts to have local businesses featured in the neighborhood, these overtures are still anti-conquest in nature, as they ultimately exist as part of Ward Village's marketing strategy to encourage investment in the neighborhood, which is owned by a private company.

Also of note is the highlighting of local ties mentioned in the team biographies. When a

member of the Ward Village team is from Hawaii, it is explicitly stated in their biography paragraph; however, when someone is not from Hawaii, where they are from is either not mentioned, or mentioned very briefly in the middle of the paragraph. For example, in President of Hawaii Region Doug Johnstone's biography, it notes that he was "born and raised in Honolulu." In the Senior Vice President David Major's biography, it doesn't mention where he was born and raised, just that he has been an attorney in Hawai'i "for the last 15 years." Often, the length of time they have been in Hawaii is mentioned, probably to add credibility with the local community.

There is clearly a conscious effort to designate Ward Village as a respectful representation of Hawaii, with community commitments and hiring of people who are "locals." However, revenue from Ward Village ultimately goes to Howard Hughes Holdings Inc., which is based in Texas. Purporting to be a part of the local community by placing community actions and Hawaiian ties prominently on the website, while ultimately being owned by a company from the continent, is quintessentially anti-conquest.

### ***Apartment Building Names***

Hawaiian is most used in the names of the condominiums being promoted by Ward Village. The names of the buildings are: Victoria Place, Kō'ula, 'A'ali'i, Ke Kilohana, Ae'o, Anaha, Waiea, The Launiu Ward Village, Kalae, The Park Ward Village, and Ulana Ward Village. Eight out of ten complexes have a Hawaiian word in the name. For completed condominiums, they simply have a page on the Ward Village website. For condominiums that are being built and currently for sale, they have their own websites (The Launiu Ward Village, Kalae, The Park Ward Village, and Ulana Ward Village). It is notable that none of these pages define the Hawaiian words that are chosen to name these apartment buildings. This is a perfect example of anti-conquest naming practices. For example, the name "Ke Kilohana", meaning "lookout" (Na Puke Wehewehe), is chosen to give the condominium a more "local" and "native" identity, while not actually educating people who may be using the space on the word's meaning or how the name was chosen.

Next, consider the languages used on the realty sites. All of these websites include a Japanese language option. This implies that the luxury condominiums are being aimed at Japanese buyers as well as Americans. This language choice goes against the attempts to connect to the local Hawaiian society and culture, which was expressed in the overview websites analyzed above.<sup>1</sup> The overwhelming marketing of the condominiums toward Japanese and American buyers reinforces the anti-conquest language choices in the apartment building names.

## **The Linguistic Landscape of Ward Village**

### ***Textual Landscape***

After observing the neighborhood and finding points of interest, three main signs are analyzed for how they contribute to anti-conquest narratives in Ward Village. All the signs serve unique purposes but ultimately reinforce the findings of the cyberscape that Ward Village wants to

<sup>1</sup> One exception is Ulana Ward Village, which is presented in English only and is the only housing option that has Reserved Housing, for people who make too much money to qualify for Federal Assistance, but not enough to purchase a market-price unit residence.

project an image of harmony with the local community while not authentically engaging in what that collaboration could look like, instead focusing on profit.

The wet floor sign in Figure 2 is a bottom-up sign, meaning it was installed by a private entity, Howard Hughes Incorporated. There is a Howard Hughes logo at the bottom of the sign. The sign features a symbolic icon of someone slipping, and then English, followed by Japanese. This sign is transient as it can be moved. It was likely placed when there was some rainfall, or after the sidewalk had been cleaned (though, notably, it was dry when this picture was taken).

It is interesting that the cone is marked as an official Howard Hughes “wet floor” sign, as opposed to a generic one, and that it includes Japanese as a second language. This could be implying that Howard Hughes Incorporated anticipates a largely English- and Japanese-speaking customer base in the area.

Figure 2  
*Wet Floor Cone in English and Japanese*



Figure 3  
*Private Property Plaque in Sidewalk*



The sign in Figure 3 is, unlike the “wet floor” sign, permanent. It is also a bottom-up sign posted by a private entity, Howard Hughes Incorporated. It is built into the ground throughout Ward Village’s east side and appears every 12 feet or so. It is in English only, and the register is very formal, indicating its seriousness. The choice of capital letters throughout further reinforces the authoritative tone. This sign, when juxtaposed with the “neighborhood for all” messaging of the Ward Village website, feels contradictory and rather hostile.

The sign in Figure 4 is a parking lot level sign in an above-ground parking lot near South Shore Market. There is no English, only a Roman numeral “1”. Below that, italicized, is a Hawaiian plant name, “*pā‘ū o hi‘iaka*”. Literally “the skirt of Hi‘iaka,” named after a mo‘olelo (story) where the goddess Hi‘iaka falls asleep on the beach and a skirt of vines grows around her, is a vine endemic to Hawaii (Garrett, 2013). The image behind the number “1” seems to resemble the plant. There is no translation of what the Hawaiian means, nor a summary of the mo‘olelo that inspired the name of the plant. This is another clear example of anti-conquest in practice; using the language for mere aesthetic purposes, with no regard for whether this is an appropriate space to do so, and no attempt to inform the audience of the indigenous cultural elements from which it has been plucked.

Figure 4

*Skirt of Hi ‘iaka Parking Sign*



Above one of the South Shore Market entrances (Figure 5), a sticker reads, “Ola ka wai mana, uui ae ka honua kukumaao.” With diacritic markers, this would read, “Ola ka wai mana, ulu a‘e ka honua Kukuluāe‘o.” This is a Hawaiian saying, which means, “May the sacred waters always flow, nurturing the waters of Kukuluāe‘o” (Dondoneau, 2016). There is no translation nor explanation for why this saying is above the entryway. Upon research, I found that it is part of an installation by Sig Zane, a Hilo-based designer and hula practitioner. The saying references the spring water that used to fill ponds across the Kaka‘ako area, which still flows underground today. The aim of the installation is to turn Ward Village into a “storytelling canvas of Hawaii history and culture” (Dondoneau, 2016). This is bottom-up signage, and considering that this has been around since 2016, it is probably a permanent part of the Ward Village landscape unless another art installation takes its place. There was no translation into English or artist’s note nearby for people to read and learn more. Even though there was a *kanaka maoli* (native

Hawaiian) involved in the creation of this piece, the sign still constitutes anti-conquest ideology and discourse, because (a) it does not acknowledge the Hawaiian artist to the public, (b) it does not acknowledge or inform the public of the indigenous culture and history woven into the message, and most importantly, (c) it is a part of the physical structure that replaces the indigenous object that it celebrates, namely the waters of Kukuluāe‘o.

Figure 5  
*Window Sticker Above Shopping Center Door*



### ***Auditory Landscape***

There are loudspeakers throughout Ward Village, both inside South Street Market and Ward Center Mall, and outside on Auahi Street and Kamakee Street. During the hours that I visited the site, these speakers played Hawaiian-style music, mostly instrumental with slack-key guitar and ukulele, with some vocals. This bottom-up, transient sound signage indexes a “local” and “tropical” vibe for the neighborhood, though, once again, it could be interpreted as anti-conquest: songs that have to do with Hawaiian sovereignty or struggles of native Hawaiians are absent from the rotating playlist.

### **Conclusion**

Taken altogether, the Ward Village website and the linguistic landscape of the physical space paint a picture of modern planned community development and how it interacts with local history and culture. The Ward Village website projects a professional and upper-class aesthetic with formal and thoughtful language about creating a livable, walkable community for all. However, the private property signs, the lack of contextual Hawaiian language use, and the use of Japanese as the only language other than English on their leasing websites paints a different picture. As a private enterprise, profit is the major incentive for Howard Hughes Incorporated, and while creating a walkable and comfortable community is beneficial for that aim, it is clear that the community is being advertised to a particular demographic of English-speaking mainlanders, locals, and Japanese who are interested in buying an experience they can get “only here.”

This linguistic landscape analysis is relevant to language teaching since it offers a contextualized, localized exercise for critical thinking and social awareness. For instance, it can be used as a basis for a Hawai'i local "Language Learning in the Wild" teaching activity, diversified depending on the class's English level. In a beginner class, learners can collect language samples of English, Hawaiian, and other languages, and make graphs of which languages are used the most. In an intermediate class, students can collect language samples and compare language use to neighborhoods in their country of origin. In an advanced class, students can explore Ward Village's language use with a critical eye for anti-conquest. In all instances, Ward Village provides a tangible example of how language is used in Hawai'i to reinforce anti-conquest ideologies, which English Language Learners should be aware of when living here. This linguistic landscape can also be used as a model by which neighborhoods anywhere could be explored more deeply by language learners, to strengthen their understanding of whatever place they call home.

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