



## **Decolonizing Discourses of Tropicality: Militourism and *Aloha ‘Āina* in Kiana Davenport’s Novels**

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### **Abstract**

This paper contextualizes Hawai‘i as a tropical landscape submerged under the discourse of exoticism which conceals the continuing American militarism, nuclearization, and tourist-oriented development in this archipelago. Militourism, as defined by Teresia Teaiwa, argues that the perpetuation of tourism based upon the imagination of tropical paradise conceals the continuation of colonial/neocolonial exploitation of the Hawaiian Islands. Under the discourse of tropicality, nature is instrumentalized, denying the agency and subjectivity of both the environment and Hawaiian indigene positioned as the Other. Kiana Davenport’s literary imagination of Hawai‘i contextualizes this locale as a postcolonial space, a site of conflict and contestation concerning discourses of nature. Her fictions decolonize colonial conceptions of nature by construing the *Kānaka* epistemology of *aloha ‘āina* which refigures nature as an active subject. It further posits the intertwined aspects of nature, place, and culture in Indigenous epistemology. *Aloha ‘āina* functions as a locus of Indigenous resistance interwoven with their political resistance, ongoing struggles for reclaiming ownership of land, and eventual sovereignty.

**Keywords:** *Aloha ‘Āina*, Hawaiian literature, militourism, tropicality, decolonizing discourses, postcolonial, Indigenous epistemology, *Kānaka*

## Introduction: Positioning Hawai'i as a Tropical Landscape

The Hawaiian archipelago, a chain of isolated islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, is often imagined and associated with the romanticized image of a tropical paradise. Amidst travel-oriented discourses that portray this archipelago within the tropes of exoticism and primitivism, almost everything in Hawai'i communicates through a system of codes constructed over years of cultivating the image of Hawai'i as paradise (Sasaki, 2016, p. 623). The driving factor behind contemporary tourism in Hawai'i is the construction and maintenance of a feminized and exotic imaginary, picturesque places, and submissive natives. This perpetuation of paradisaical imagery lingers into the contemporary period, where countless tourist advertisements, brochures, websites, and travel videos foreground exotic depictions of Hawai'i's beautiful beaches and scenery, complemented by the presence of the Hawaiian natives, renowned for their hospitality (Mak, 2015). Mass tourism fetishizes native Hawaiian (*Kānaka*) culture, marketing the islands' "aloha" spirit as part of a paradisaical package that, in the most recent survey, managed to attract more than 9.2 million visitors (Ide, McCartnet, & Tian, 2022, p. 2). Indigenous agency is instrumentalized and appropriated within this tourist-oriented discourse; their presence systematically written out of existence, only represented through their role as brand image and symbolic labor. Williams and Gonzalez construe how:

...tourism in Hawai'i has relied upon Native Hawaiian culture to carve out its unique niche.... Here, tourism – with its discourses of invitation and its stratified economies of extraction – has smoothed over colonial occupation and its legacy of a racialized and classed society, producing a society that relies on the commodification of Hawai'i's land, history and culture. (2017, pp. 668–669)

A successful campaign of camouflage, identified as militourism by Teresia Teaiwa (1999), underlies how the continuation of tourism and its ensuring tourist-oriented discourse in Hawai'i are essential in concealing the militarization of this archipelago. Teaiwa argues that "militourism is a phenomenon by which military or paramilitary forces ensures the smooth running of a tourist industry, and that the same tourist industry masks the military forces behind it" (1999, p. 251). The gap between perception and reality in Hawai'i is considerable; while Hawai'i is promoted as an idyllic paradise, the islands are also, in fact, home to one of the largest military arsenals in the world. Over 161 American military installations are scattered all around the islands of Hawai'i, of which Pearl Harbor is the most preeminent naval base (Ferguson & Turnbull, 1999; Ireland, 2011).

This substantial presence of American naval forces is linked to Hawai'i's strategic location in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and its geographical isolation from the American mainland. DeLoughrey foregrounds the 'myth of isolation,' in which the vast geographical distances of the Pacific islands configure tropical isles into contained spaces of a laboratory (2013, p. 169). Euro-American views of Pacific islands as part of a sparsely populated, asocial ocean "space" provide a convenient justification for their continuous military presence. The reductionist view of the Pacific as a "set of islands in a far sea" undermines Oceania cosmologies of a "sea of islands," which reject the arbitrary land/sea binary imposed by colonialism and instead posit the rich cultural history shared by the Polynesian people for thousands of years (Hau'ofa, 1993, p. 90).

Scholars have conceptualized tropicality as a term to underline a potent discourse that constructs the tropical world as the West's environmental Other, both as a conceptual space and a physical spatiality. A critical theorization of tropicality is pioneered by David Arnold, who argues that the notion of 'the tropics' "was a Western way of defining something culturally and politically alien, as well as environmentally distinctive, from Europe and other parts of the temperate zone" (1996, p. 6). In other words, the tropics are no less an idea than a geographical reality (Scott, 2010, p. 69). Arnold's theorization is influenced by Edward Said's seminal work of *Orientalism*, the system of representation that constructs the Orient as inferior to the West, although in tropicality this discourse is loaded with environmental overtures. Based upon the gendered discourse of masculine/feminine, the tropical Pacific is construed as a "virgin, romanticized nature," hence as a passive, non-agent, and non-subject, open for Western domination and exploitation (Plumwood, 2003, p. 52). Both the tropical environments and the Indigenous people were rendered devoid of self-autonomy and agency, a view perpetuated by their (conspicuous) absence within the popular representations of media and literature.

Representations of tropical areas of the world, and concerning the Pacific in general and Hawai'i in particular, mainly foreground the tropicality of an idyllic paradise, written by visiting white Anglo-American writers. The tropics are idealized, delegated as mere backgrounds or passive settings pandering to white fantasies and romances, where the reality of the Indigenous struggle for survival is left as mere background (Spencer, 2010, p. 37). This prevailing representation can be traced back to Mark Twain's visit to Hawai'i in the 1860s, published as *Letters from Hawai'i*, which contextualizes tropical Hawai'i as the exotic, alien Other in contrast with the temperate American mainland. This paradigm can be observed through Twain's own assertion that:

...no alien land in all the world has any deep strong charm for me but one (Hawai'i), no other land could so longingly and so beseechingly

haunt me, sleeping and waking, through half a lifetime, as that one has done. Other things leave me, but it abides; other things change, but it remains the same. For me its balmy airs are always blowing, its summer seas flashing in the sun; the pulsing of its surf beat is in my ear. (1975, p. 64)

Tropicality, in this sense, conjures the imagination of white Western readers, in which the idea of ‘the tropics’ alludes toward binary oppositions of temperate/tropical, an alien land that charms the visitor (Collier & Davis, 2019, pp. 14–15). This representation of a tropical landscape reflects the writers’ imaginative engagement with the natural world, as a landscape is a socially constructed text. Dominant views of tropicality driving the popular imagination of Hawai’i persist into the contemporary period. Scholars have identified how the majority of white authors writing about Hawai’i in the form of novels and young adult fiction continue to construe an idealized image of Hawai’i based upon the tropicality of an exotic paradise (Lesuma, 2018; Najita, 2006; Rapp, 2004).

Kiana Davenport, a Native Hawaiian author of both Hawaiian and Caucasian ancestry, explores the interconnections between tropical landscapes, postcolonial subjectivity, and cultural resistance in her fictions.<sup>1</sup> Davenport’s novels, *Shark Dialogues* (1995), *Songs of Exile* (1999), and *House of Many Gods* (2007), conceptualize a decolonial critique of anthropocentric discourse to conjure an alternative paradigm based upon *aloha ‘āina* epistemology. Davenport’s literary imagination underlines how postcolonial writers’ own subjectivity is ultimately implicated in both the natural history as well as the traumatic history of place (Kamada, 2010, p. 3). Her representation of the natural world decolonizes the Western perspective of passive nature by foregrounding the intertwined nature of place and culture, challenging the Western nature/culture dichotomy. Davenport posits the possibility of reform, advocacy, and activism situated within Native Hawaiians’ historic struggle for sovereignty and greater autonomy (Toyosato, 2000). Her emphasis is to resituate the subjectivity of nature with its own agency, rejecting the discourse of tropicality and the continuation of neocolonial rule manifested through militourism in Hawai’i.

This essay explores how Davenport’s literary imagination of nature, place, and culture construes the discourse of tropicality in the form of militourism and its decolonizing discourse through the *Kānaka* epistemology of *aloha ‘āina*. It analyzes how tropicality

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<sup>1</sup> What constitutes a Native Hawaiian literature, or, for that matter, who is considered a Native Hawaiian, have been the subject of much scholarly debate. Luangphinit argues that the degree to which Hawai’i’s population is intermarried and interrelated causes difficulties in defining Native Hawaiian demographics based upon ancestry (Luangphinit, 2015, p. 221). People of mixed ancestry (*hapa-haole*/mixed race) are considered Native Hawaiian, and Native Hawaiian literature, as defined by Ho’omanawanui, broadly refers to the writings produced by *Kānaka* referencing Hawai’i or Hawai’ian culture (2015, p. 227).

instrumentalizes tropical landscapes by denying the agency and subjectivity of both the Hawaiian indigene and the natural world. The paper highlights how Davenport's narrative echoes the traumatic history of colonial/neocolonial imperial rule and how the discourse of exoticism conceals the existence of militarism, nuclearization, and tourist-oriented development in the Hawaiian islands. It also underlines how *aloha ʻāina* conjures a counter-hegemonic thought that moves away from universalizing Western environmental discourse. Decolonizing discourses of tropicality are emphasized in the form of personifying nature with its own subjectivity and agency, embracing ʻāina as family, and resisting illegal American occupation of Hawaiian *wahi pana* (sacred places). Cultural resistance in Indigenous contexts is interwoven with their political resistance, reclaiming ownership of land, and eventual sovereignty. This affirmation of Hawaiian cultural practices functions as powerful sites of identity for *Kānaka*, empowering their self-identity based upon love and respect toward the environment.

Given this colonial/neocolonial context and the prevailing discourse of tropicality, the emergence of *Kānaka* literature is positioned as a counter discourse. In line with Harlow's concept of resistance literature, Native Hawaiian literature is defined as a genre of writing that was inseparable from political movements due to the historical backdrop of colonialism (Harlow, 1987, p. 15). Past and present struggles between American imperial rule and Indigenous interests are palpable in this archipelago, contextualizing the dynamics of displacement, dispossession, and repossession in Hawai'i. *Kānaka* literature arises from the need of Indigenous writers to tell their truth, their own story, instead of having it represented by foreign, white (*haole*) writers. Their literature contests hegemonic tropicality founded upon Anglo-American discourse and instead contextualizes

Hawaiian culture and asserts their identity as indigenous Pacific people seeking self-determination and political independence. Reflecting both values of the ancient past and thoughts of the modern era, Hawaiian literature holds a unique place as an ethnic American literature. (Ho'omanawanui, 2015, p. 258)

*Kānaka* literature developed from the 1960s' to the present is considered contemporary Hawaiian literature, resulting from the era of reclaiming and perpetuating their cultural heritage previously oppressed under American domination, known as the *Hawaiian Renaissance*. Pre-1965, English was employed as the only language for education and communication, a form of mental colonialism that resulted in an inferiority complex of the indigene, subjected as they were to a primitive/modern binarism based on a language divide. As Ho'omanawanui posits:

...because the Hawaiian language was severely eroded by colonial laws and social enforcement during this time (by the 1930's), very little *Kanaka Maoli* literature was published from the 1940s until the revival of Hawaiian politics and cultural practices in the 1960s, a period generally known today as the 'Hawaiian Renaissance.' While some cultural arts (like *hula*) have flourished, others, such as Indigenous-produced literature, have grown at a much slower rate." (2004, p. 87)

As literature of place, *Kānaka* literature explores the interconnection between nature and culture in Hawaiian epistemology to critique the instrumentalizing Western discourse of tropicality. *Aloha 'āina*, love and respect toward the land and all its entities, is an underlying principle of *Kānaka* epistemology, in which the value of *āina* (land) is familial, not monetary (Ho'omanawanui, 2008, p. 115). This principle foregrounds the active agency of nature in the reciprocal relationship between human and more-than-human worlds. In contrast, Western discourse on tropical landscapes construes nature as a passive, static, setting. Exemplifying *aloha 'āina* as a core tenet, Native Hawaiian literature is primarily a literature of place:

...indigenous people are all about place. Land/'āina, defined as "that which feeds," is the everything to our sense of love, joy, and nourishment. This is not a metaphor.... You came from a place. You grew in a place and you had a relationship with that place. This is an epistemological idea.... Land/ocean shapes my thinking, my way of being, and my priorities of what is of value." (Meyer, 2003, p. 219)

Native Hawaiian literature functions not only as a site of critique toward neo/colonial discourse based upon an anthropocentric paradigm but also as a space of empowerment, agency, sustainability, and continuity. *Kānaka* literature directly subverts and challenges American colonialism through its counter-narrative, focusing not on what is *haole* or foreign but upon Indigenous values instead: the land, the sea, the people, and their intimate relationship (McDougall, 2010, p. 61). This is achieved through spatializing of realms and time, rejecting the primarily anthropocentric Western view and emphasizing the living agency of the natural world. Interconnections between nature and culture manifested through literary imagination by Indigenous writers such as Kiana Davenport, articulate their ancestral epistemologies of being, and reject the human-centered paradigm of Western discourse. As Fujikane posits,

indigeneity continues to be a material positionality that connects *Kānaka Maoli* to Indigenous peoples around the world and one from which multipronged work against occupation and settler colonialism can be mobilized. (2021, p. 11)

Challenging the Western discourse of tropicality meant resisting on both epistemological and philosophical levels and in the political struggle for sovereignty. This mode of “living a decolonial present” (2021, p. 12), as Fujikane suggests, meant practicing a more sustainable project of living the earth, materializing that future beyond the present state of settler colonialism. Articulating the agency of nature and the interwoven nature of human and more-than-human world relationships further probes the eventuality of decolonizing discourse on the environment.

### **Tropical Landscape: Militourism in Davenport’s Fictions**

Tropicality construes tropical landscape as the exoticized and romanticized Other of the Western world, a prevailing discourse that profoundly impacts the tropics, and the lingering presence of neocolonial forces as active material reality (Lundberg, Regis, & Agbonifo, 2022). Both as a discourse and a material practice, tropicality underlines the intertwined relationship between empire and ecology, especially the radical ecological transformation wrought by empire. This “historical embeddedness of ecology in Western imperial enterprise,” stated by Huggan and Tiffin (2010, p. 3), construes how (tropical) nature is positioned as a site of exploitation, scientific research, and militarization, carefully concealed within a crafted guise of tropical paradise. Under the dominant Western discourse of nature, the natural world is gendered as the feminine and exotic Other, positioned as a commodity for colonial endeavor.

Val Plumwood underlines how colonization of nature relies upon a range of conceptual strategies that construct the non-human as ‘Others.’ This discourse understands both non-human agency and value in hegemonic terms and subordinates them to a rational, Western human agency (Plumwood, 2001, p. 89). As a manifestation of the underlying anthropocentric Western perspective, imperialism systematically transforms the ecosystem in the tropical periphery for the economic/material benefit of the metropolitan center. Similarly, Indigenous people are seen as ‘the Other’ on a parallel status with passive nature, reduced as a means to the colonizers’ ends. The notion that the Other had no agency led to the need for Western colonials to impose perspectives, meanings, and agencies upon the colonized, including their paradigm of human and more-than-human world interaction. This impact of colonial discourse upon tropical landscapes is foregrounded through the literary imagination of postcolonial writers such as Kiana Davenport. Their voices articulate the traumatic legacy of imperial rule while contemplating the possibility of resistance and reclamation. Rejecting the tropes of exoticism, Hawai’i in Davenport’s literary imagination is constructed as a postcolonial space, defined by legacies of physical traumas, exploitation, and cultural appropriation (Indriyanto, 2019, p. 127).

Representations of place in Davenport's fictions foreground the image of a violated nature, ravaged by the historicity of colonialism. As biotic and political ecologies are materially and imaginatively intertwined, this displacement between people and place in postcolonial society is reimagined through poetics (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011, p. 13). Landscape in Davenport's fictions alludes to the continuation of imperial exploitation in the form of militourism, the presence of militarism illicitly concealed under the image of timeless tropical utopia. In *Shark Dialogues*, Davenport underlines the beginning of rapid American militarism during the Second World War, as Hawai'i became the frontline of the American Pacific campaign. American military presence leads to the acquisition of vast, seemingly untamed landscapes on the Big Island of Hawai'i to support the war effort:

News came that, on the Big Island, the U.S. Army had turned the Ka'u Desert near Kīlauea Crater into a training ground. Tanks crunched across volcano beds, graves of ancient warriors were obliterated by machine gun and mortar firing. There were rumblings from *Pele*. Flame shots from her fire pit at night. (Davenport, 1995, p. 174)

The quote above highlights the contrasting paradigm between Western and Hawaiian epistemology concerning land, in which empty space is seen as wilderness in Western consciousness, a land without value until it is cultivated by human agency (Cronon, 1996). The presence of vast wilderness on the Big Island of Hawai'i, geographically distant from settlements, is seen as an ideal place for weaponry testing and other military installations. This paradigm denies the sanctity and the intrinsic value of land, or *āina*, in Hawaiian epistemology, a word loaded with socio-cultural significance.

Internalization of Western colonial concepts is further problematized by the alienation of the Hawaiian *hapa haole* (half-breed) from the sanctity of *āina*. Living on mainland America, Jess is unable to comprehend *āina* beyond its material aspect of land. The novel narrates this displacement as follows: "How is it, Jess? You know so much. And yet you are naive. You think land means only trees and soil" (Davenport, 1995, p. 137). This scathing criticism alludes to Western discourse, which comprehends *āina* as merely land while dismissing the socio-cultural importance of this concept in the Hawaiian lexicon. *Kānaka* are connected to the *āina* and to each other through the parentage of *Wakea*, the ancestors of the Hawaiian people (Inglis, 2013, p. 10). In contrast, Western discourses of nature, positioned as the universal value legitimizing colonial rule, comprehend landscape as a passive, static object, gendered as the feminine body. This aligns with Plumwood's idea of nature being instrumentalized as lacking human qualities such as mind and agency; as such, identification and sympathy are blocked for those classified as nature, the Other (1996, p. 137).



The hypersensitivity of exotic tropical discourse concealed and deflected attention from the violence of imperial occupation, militarization, and nuclear testing. This manifestation of militourism construes a more subtle form of nature despoilation, referred to as 'slow violence' by Rob Nixon. As Nixon further explains,

slow violence is a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. (2011, p. 2)

While previous acts of exploitation toward 'āina can be interpreted as a more direct form of exploitation, the very nature of nuclear contamination rejects this classification. The subtle nature of nuclear radiation causes afflicted people to be unaware of the danger of contamination until it reaches critical levels and has irreversibly ravaged their bodies from the inside. Moreover, the majority of American nuclear installations in Hawai'i are located within close proximity of several Indigenous settlements living in subservience to their natural environment, especially the sea (Firth & Von Strokirch, 1997).

In *House of Many Gods*, Davenport dramatizes the contamination from nuclear leakage in the areas surrounding Pearl Harbor from the perspective of Lopaka, a native Hawaiian activist. A vocal advocate for *Kānaka* resistance, Lopaka represents the indigene's critique of the existence of nuclear contamination within the carefully crafted image of tropical landscapes, aptly stated as a nuclearized paradise by Haunani-Kay Trask (1993). The subtle existence of Hawai'i as a nuclearized paradise is narrated as follows:

...right now we've got two dozen nuclear subs homeported here in Pearl Harbor. You think they don't have accidents on those ships? Millions of gallons of radioactive waste from those subs have already been dumped into the harbor. (Davenport, 2007, p. 82-83)

The rendering of nuclear toxicity conjures the unseen danger of contamination, concealed within the discourse of tropicality. Toxicity, as Buell argued, posits the "fear of a poisoned world, which is increasingly pressed, debated, debunked and reiterated" (2001, p. 30), and literary imagination functions to articulate the presence of a toxic and polluted environment. The implicit danger of nuclear contamination and its unseen presence, both upon the environment and Indigenous communities is further explored in the following passage:

...radioactive water from the harbours and rivers seeping into our soil. The stuff we stand in, in our fields. Stuff that seeps into the grass our dairy cows and pigs eat. The Navy has even admitted their hazard zone is two and a half miles in radius. That means all those farmers and kids could be contaminated. (Davenport, 2007, p. 93)

Nuclear radiation transforms areas in its close proximity into hazardous zones, contaminating the land and the seas with toxic substances. This manifestation of slow violence highlights the dispersed temporal scale of nuclearization as well as its relative invisibility due to its very nature. This invisibility of nuclear radiation denies the presence of ongoing militarization of the Hawaiian islands with its detrimental impact upon the *Kānaka*. Contradictory images between visible tropical landscapes and invisible nuclear radiation beneath the land surface and the seas further illustrates how militourism construes the discourse of tropicality as a concealment.

Davenport further problematizes the issue of development as a pivotal factor driving contemporary tourism, in which the complexity of human-environmental relations based upon sustainability and reciprocity has been displaced in line with anthropocentric Western values. Social and cultural identity are managed and negotiated within these dominant tourist-oriented values, based on the generalizing global discourse of the Western paradigm. Escobar points out how:

...development was – and continued to be for the most part – a top-down, ethnocentric and technocratic approach, which treated people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of progress. (1995, p. 44)

This reliance on the Western model of development creates a situation that disenfranchises locals from their traditional environmental relationality and permanently alters the local ecology. Davenport presents the indictment of globalization's effects on local cultures and the environment in Hawai'i through the site of an ancient Polynesian *heiau* (place of worship), juxtaposed with the image of an ongoing resort project with environmental consequences,

...they stood gazing along the coastline, site of earliest Polynesian landings almost two thousand years ago, site of ancient villages and fishing fleets, and sacred heiau still being excavated.

Between here and Miloli'i up the coast," Pono said, "they're building a nine-hundred-million-dollar Riviera Resort with marinas, the whole works. Chemicals, oil pollution, sewage. It will kill the fishing and the

reef, impoverish all the ole-time net fisherman of these small coastal villages. (Davenport, 1995, p. 200)

The establishment of vast tourist resorts is stated to bring potential economic benefits for the local inhabitants by providing various occupations. This scheme is entangled with neocolonial discourse, which seeks to exploit the indigene as a source of cheap labor, working within the tourist industry for a minimal wage while simultaneously performing symbolic labor as a welcoming, subservient native. Native Hawaiians and residents resort to low-paying service jobs that cater to tourists, and a plethora of *Kānaka* culture is marketed as commodities to fulfill visitors' fantasies of an exotic, tropical paradise (Feaser & Chan, 2006, p. 7). *Song of the Exile* problematizes the conflict between the Western discourse of development and the necessity of preserving land for traditional Hawaiian lifestyles. Western discourse, represented through Vivian's assertion, considers the use of land for farming and planting taro as a waste of prime real estate compared to its potential economic use as tourist resorts in the name of progress and development:

"I know I'm ignorant about your culture," Vivian said. "I'm just not meant for the islands. Your local talk. The food you eat. I have no friends. All his friends talk about is "*ina, ina*."

"Land is what Hawaiians are about."

"But, you're not forward-thinking. Don't you see? You people can't waste precious land on farming, planting taro. You need developments. Hotels. That's what progress is."

"Hotels! So my nephews can be busboys?" Malia turned away, afraid she would hurt the woman. (1999, p. 255)

The dramatization of militourism, reflected in Davenport's fictions, criticizes stereotypes about the tranquil Hawai'i archipelago, exotic landscapes, and hospitable natives within the underlying discourse of tropicality. As Kay-Trask summarizes, the portrayal of the Hawaiian Islands as a paradise is a myth deliberately created to attract tourists, legitimizing the necessity of tourism as essential for the development of the local community (1993, p. 27). Nature is synthesized for military and tourist purposes, the environment is instrumentalized, and the indigene disenfranchised, all carefully submerged within the myth of tropicality. Under the dominant trope of militarism, the literary imagination of the postcolonial Hawaiian writer foregrounds how the myth of tropical discourse conceals the continuation of neocolonial imperial presence in the form of militarism, nuclearization, and ecologically unsustainable tourist developments. This is the contradictory double figuration of Hawai'i:

...these iconic representations and realities – fantasy island and U.S military command – lay in sharp contrast to, and in fact are meant to obscure understandings of Hawai'i as its own nation and *Kanaka Maoli* homeland. (Rohrer, 2016, p. 17)

The image of the exotic, tropical paradise designates Hawaiian landscapes as a passive, static, unchanging Other, identified with the feminine, in contrast to the masculine, rational Western paradigm. Militourism problematizes the continuing presence of neocolonial imperial rule, transforming and despoiling Hawaiian nature while simultaneously preserving and maintaining the lucid image of an unspoiled paradise. The representation of Hawaii as a space of decoloniality addresses the ongoing damage, trauma, inequality, and abuses of power in a postcolonial landscape (Indriyanto & Darmawan, 2023, p. 66).

This dual objectification of nature/indigene is subverted through the refiguration of nature as its own active, distinctive force. Through her literary imagination, which foregrounds tropical Western discourse and its transformative impact upon Hawaiian landscapes, Davenport constructs the image of Hawai'i not as a paradise but as a postcolonial space, a site of conflict and contestation. Within the discourse of tropicality, Davenport considers the possibility of resistance, articulating the agency of nature and empowering *Kānaka* struggle to reclaim their land and eventually their sovereignty. Refiguration of nature with its own agency and the socio-political goal of empowering the Hawaiian indigene are intricately interwoven with each other, as “fundamentally, sovereignty is *aloha 'āina*” (Dessouky, 2011, p. 254).

### **Decolonizing Tropical Discourse of Nature: Articulation of *Aloha 'Āina***

The representation of nature in literary works often functions to legitimize the anthropocentric principle of human sovereignty over nature. The commitment to subjugate, control, and exploit the natural landscape is described as a “metaphysical obligation to rule” (Said, 1994, p. 10), underlying the founding narratives of imperial rule. This circulation of the anthropocentric paradigm naturalizes the discourse of human and non-human relationships and helps propagate the destructive exploitation of the more-than-human world. As Oppermann posits:

...the verbal constructions of nature, either in its romanticized, idealized form, or as hostile wilderness, especially in poetry and fiction, usually lead to a binary way of either/or thinking that justifies the present catastrophic abuse of nature. To counter this logocentric approach, ecocriticism embarks upon the project of reconceptualizing

nature, not as an object of observation or interpretation, but as an active agency in its own right. (1999, p. 4)

To challenge this human/non-human dichotomy, which instrumentalizes nature as an apparatus to enforce imperial domination, decolonial and postcolonial writers refigure the conception of nature, not merely as a passive setting but as an active subject or effective actor. Writers from Indigenous ethnic groups criticize “the exclusionary opposition between nature and culture which is based on an oppressively reductionist and instrumentalist view of the non-human (Plumwood, 2002, p. 33). In Indigenous epistemology, nature is personified instead of instrumentalized, underlining its own agency and positing the intertwined aspects of nature, place, and culture. Similarly, *Kānaka* epistemology of nature, as Archy posits, “did not distinguish between supernatural and human agency as modern Western society does” (2018, p. 88). Their portrayal of nature subverted western conceptions of static and exotic tropical landscapes, imploring the environment as a core discourse based on embracing love and respect toward the land and its entities.

A landscape depends on the material world, but it is also built upon the preconceptions, assumptions and opinions of those who, through words or pictures, turn a witnessed environment into a represented landscape. (Kessler, 2012, p. 278)

Davenport’s *Shark Dialogues* configures the active agency of nature, focusing upon volcanic eruption through the personification of *Pele*, goddess of the volcano, in accordance with the Hawaiian conception of *mana*. According to Polynesian belief, *mana* can be defined as a supernatural force or power that may be ascribed to persons, spirits, or inanimate objects: it is the force that powers the universe, expressed in everything (Mitchell, 1982, p. 89). This epistemology asserts the agency of matter upon all entities, rejecting the Eurocentric conception of nature without intrinsic values and agency.

*Shark Dialogues* dramatizes the active agency of a volcanic eruption in the Kīlauea crater, on the Big Island of Hawai‘i. Hot smoke coming out of Kīlauea crater functions as a reminder of *Pele*’s presence on Mount Kīlauea, and at any given time, her rampage manifests in the form of an eruption. The novel vividly represents the personification of natural forces, a: “strong taint of sulfur in the air, and wisps of steam rising from cracked earth, a reminder that the volcanoes were alive, that *Pele* was seething, gathering subterranean forces” (Davenport, 1995, p. 125). The phrase “a reminder that the volcanoes were alive” affirms Hawaiians’ epistemology of *Pele* as a volcanic goddess. In Hawaiian tradition, *Pele* is synonymous with the land itself as the creator of Hawaiian isles; her fires and lava rock are not only a symbol of destruction

but also of rejuvenation, the cynical nature of life and death (Heatwole, 1988, pp. 2–3). Concurrently, Osorio contemplates how *Pele's aloha*, manifested through lava, is both rage and rapture, destruction and creation (2021). This refiguration of nature challenges Western colonial discourse by expounding the active agency of nature personified and the existence of the more-than-human world, as seen in the subsequent quote:

...in the distance they saw fiery skies, even clouds glowed with the crimson reflection of liquid rock shooting thousands of feet into the air. In this otherworldly region, *Pele*, Volcano Goddess, reigned, her eerie presence everywhere. Hundreds of locals stood at the rim of the steaming, sulfur-streaked caldera of Kīlauea, inside which was the eerily quiet *Halemaumau* Pit where *Pele* lived. People chanted and prayed, asking her to spare another village, another school, another church. And in the distance, *Pu'u'O'o* spewed fresh lava. (Davenport, 1995, p. 198)

While the discourse of tropicality conjures the image of Hawai'i as a timeless, idyllic paradise; this evocative description of a volcanic eruption positions nature as an untamed force, beyond human agency to control. Contrasting the depiction of passive nature under tropicality, Native Hawaiians' environmental imagination on the destructive potential of nature is intertwined with their geographical location, situated with a great number of active volcanoes. How a given society relates to its physical environment, is as much a question of culture, values, and beliefs as it is of economics, politics, and technology. Tilling et al. (2010, p. 11) identify how Mauna Kea and Kīlauea are among the world's most active volcanoes, with an average rate of eruptions every two years. This precarious situation results in deep reverence toward the personified natural forces honored through chants, prayers, and ceremonies. De Silva's study on the importance of Indigenous narratives and storytelling articulates the close connection between the Hawaiians and their environment. Her interview with Ka'eha, a *Kānaka* cultural practitioner, recounts the importance of cultivating a profound relationship with the *āina* to prevent natural disasters:

...it is said that a *pule* (prayer) was offered to the spirit and *aumakua* (gods) in each of the four directions before and after being on the '*āina*, so, the people were blessed in turn, and their crops were safeguarded both from natural disaster and wild boars. Even today, we continue with our *pule* to our spirit and *aumakua* before we step into the *lo 'i kalo* and other cultivations. We deeply respect the land and *kalo* because we know it is then, that we are blessed with an abundance of food. (De Silva, 2019, pp. 63–64)

Davenport's other novel, *House of Many Gods*, foregrounds the Hawaiian concept of *wahi pana*, a sacred place of special interest and significance, whose existence is paramount in the perpetuation of *Kānaka* cultural knowledge. Each of these special places has distinguished landmarks, is given specific names, and is connected to the rich cultural productions of history, chants, stories, and songs, that are preserved from one generation to the next (Mcgregor, 2007, p. 89; David & Wilson, 2002). During the colonial imposition of Western values in the Hawaiian Islands, the prohibition of using *ōlelo Hawai'i* alienated *Kānaka* from their ancestral traditions, including discourses of human and more-than-human relationships based upon *aloha 'āina*. Love and respect for nature as an essential part of the Hawaiian conception of family (*ohana*) were transformed due to the enforcement of the Western anthropocentric paradigm (Indriyanto, 2020, p. 5). In this state of displacement, the preservation of place names of *wahi pana* functions as a site to preserve traditional heritage, based upon the stories (*mo'olelo*), myths, and legends contained within them.

Existence of *wahi pana* allows Hawaiian indigene to maintain and perpetuate *aloha 'āina* at their sacred places. *House of Many Gods* dramatizes *wahi pana* as a locus of Hawaiian resistance through the following quote:

Our history is never forgotten. Only hidden.... Place-names remain, and with them the names of chiefs and chiefesses, gods and demigods. And all their feats and defeats... In sacred places, they are still worshipped. Their stories remembered and retold.... (Davenport, 2007, p. 113)

As the narrative progresses, Davenport positions Native Hawaiians' resistance to reclaim Kaho'olawe island and Makua Valley from the United States Navy as a site of contestation between Western and Hawaiian discourses on environment. This contention is founded upon the American assumption that these locations are desolate wastelands, well suited for US Navy weapons testing and storage. *Executive Order 10436*, enacted by Eisenhower in 1953, officially placed the island of *Kaho'olawe* within the jurisdiction of the United States Navy for weapon test infrastructure (Menton & Tamura, 1999, p. 317). Similarly, in 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson signed an executive order handing over control of the entire Makua Valley to the federal government. The poetic imagination of displacement and dispossession conjures the historicity of Hawai'i, and connotes it with the present context of a decolonizing understanding of nature as a focal point in the process of reclamation and reorientation.

Criticizing the illegal American occupation of their rightful territory, Native Hawaiians' resistance was primarily spearheaded by *Protect Kaho'olawe Ohana* (PKO), founded in the 1970s to stop the use of Kaho'olawe island by the US Navy. *Kānaka* denial of

the United States' claim was expressed by George Helm, a PKO activist who was later lost at sea while trying to land on Kaho'olawe island in March 1977. He condemned the hypocrisy of the United States that the very foundation of national security is founded on the destruction of land rightfully owned by Indigenous peoples, who are an integral part of America itself. His statement is quoted as follows:

...my duty is to protect Mother Earth, who gives me life. And to give thanks with humility as well as ask forgiveness for the arrogance and insensitivity of man. What is national defense when what is being destroyed is the very thing the military is entrusted to defend, the sacred land of (Hawai'i) America. This continued disregard of our seriousness, this refusal to give credibility to the Hawaiian culture based on *aloha 'āina*, forces me to protest. (Osorio, 2014, p. 137)

Ioane (2022) articulates her concept of *wahi pana*, *aloha 'āina*, as places where movements and resistances in the name of *aloha 'āina* occur. This concept states how decolonization is only possible through the articulation of *aloha 'āina*, reclaiming the importance of mother-earth while simultaneously reclaiming the right to sovereignty upon their ancestral land, as one cannot be achieved without the other. *Aloha 'āina* has been a rallying cry for resistance to US colonization and increasing globalization due to the impact of the tourist oriented industry (Scanlan, 2017, p. 977). *House of Many Gods* dramatizes *Kānaka* struggle against American military occupations of their sacred places by asserting their role as stewards, not the owners of *'āina*. Explosions that devastated Makua Valley are personified as acts of violence ravaging the body of Mother Earth, bleeding with each shelling,

...she felt the breath of Mākua, felt the landscape turn to her, imploring. In the absolute silence, a powerful explosion ripped the air. The ground literally shook beneath her. People shouted and staggered to their feet, hills of red soil erupting in the air. They saw Mākua bleed. As they sped down the road she looked back at the valley, bombs still exploding in the mountains. Again, she felt the suffering of Mākua, felt the land imploring her. (Davenport, 2007, p. 152)

*Wahi pana* of Makua Valley and Kaho'olawe island is positioned as a locus of contestation between contrasting values in perceiving the more-than-human world. Western discourse of empty spaces as wilderness is unable to comprehend the rationalization of *Kānaka* continuous persistence in defending these seemingly worthless landscapes. This is represented through the voice of an American officer: "godawful, bloody islands, why do you people stay? What is here worth staying", and "nothing here worth dying for" (Davenport, 2007, p. 199), echoing how the discourse



of tropicality construes the Hawaiian landscape beyond its selected exotic places suited for tourist development as passive land, devoid of intrinsic value. Colonial discourse of nature denied the material agency of the land, a view rejected through the decolonial endeavor of Hawaiian epistemology, embodying nature with their own agency, subjectivity, and *mana*. Osorio (2021) implores how practicing *aloha ʻāina* meant cultivating an intimacy with the *ʻāina* Hawaiians had been estranged from. This affirmation of Hawaiian cultural practices provides powerful sites of identity for *Kānaka*, empowering their self-identity and functioning as a locus of counter-hegemonic thought against universalizing Western discourse of the environment:

Mākua, their Mother Earth, their parent, was telling them she knew. She saw. How the people were offering their *aloha*, their *mālama*. They were offering to take care of her. She saw they were prepared to die protecting her. For them, she would live on. (Davenport, 2007, p. 255)

Resistance to the discourse of tropicality based upon Western anthropocentrism is reflected through recontextualizing nature as an active subject. Davenport conveys the more-than-human world as having their own agencies and power in accordance with Hawaiians' conception of *mana*, challenging the instrumentalization of nature in the Western paradigm. Moreover, there is no demarcation between nature and culture in *Kānaka* consciousness, in which cultural resistance is interwoven with political resistance, reclaiming ownership of land and eventual sovereignty. This phenomenon aligns with Huggan and Tiffin's interpretation of postcolonial literature for social and environmental advocacy as a full-fledged form of engaged cultural critique (2010, p. 12). The reinterpretation of nature articulated through Davenport's fiction alludes toward the continued struggle of *Kānaka* sovereignty, in which sovereignty is interwoven with *aloha ʻāina*, love of the land and all its entities, as a sign of Hawaiian patriotism. As part of the continuing colonial project is to sever Indigenous Hawaiian connections to their tradition, their sacred places, and their *aina* as a whole, decolonizing colonialized tropical discourses of nature is only possible through the articulation of *aloha ʻāina*, resisting Western conceptions of passive nature. *Wahi pana aloha ʻāina* exemplifies the traditional functions of place names as a site to preserve ancestral heritage, viewed through the lens of *Kānaka* contemporary struggles to reclaim their inherent sovereignty.

### **Conclusion: Continuing Towards *Wahi Pana, Aloha ʻĀina,***

Davenport's fictions conjure the historicity of Hawai'i as a postcolonial space subjected to the discourse of tropicality and the trope of militourism while simultaneously articulating the possibility of resistance and reorientation. Her novels challenge the representation of Hawai'i as a timeless paradisaal archipelago, instead foregrounding

the continuing neocolonial rule in the form of militarism, nuclearization, and tourist-oriented development in the Hawaiian Islands. In accordance with Western anthropocentric discourse, nature is instrumentalized and parallelized with Indigenous people, positioned as the Other. On the other hand, Indigenous understandings of nature place humans in equal status with non-human entities. The dramatization of the interwoven nature between Indigenous life and the environment recognizes the involvement of humans as ecological agents and part of nature, rejecting Western demarcations of nature and culture.

Nature in Davenport's fictions is personified as an active agent with their own subjectivity and agency, decolonizing the dominant Western epistemology of nature. This portrayal of nature as an active subject rejects Western colonial discourse that assumes that humanity is obliged to conquer and cultivate natural forces, which are rendered bereft of intrinsic value. The personification of nature alludes toward the emotional and spiritual bond of *Kānaka* with *āina* based upon shared familial kinship. Another resistance is reflected through the continuous struggle of reclaiming *wahi pana* as a locus of ancestral heritage, perpetuating *aloha 'āina*, and resisting the continuous American military presence. Nature is positioned as a site of contestation between Hawaiian and Western values of the environment in both cultural and political spheres. The reinterpretation of natural agency is interwoven with the indigenes' political resistance, reclaiming ownership of land and eventual sovereignty.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for their thoughtful work, especially for identifying the use of 'ōlelo Hawai'i throughout the entire text. I also thank the Editor, Associate Professor Anita Lundberg, for her engaged reading and expert editing of this text. I further extend my appreciation to the anonymous copyeditors who have corrected my article.

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