

# ***Aloha aina*: Native Hawai'ian Environmental Justice for Sustainability in Kiana Davenport's Fictions**

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**Abstract.** This paper contextualizes the representation of environmental issues in Kiana Davenport's fictions. A native Hawai'ian writer, Davenport foregrounds issues such as forced land appropriation, pollution and toxic emission from the United States' military presence in this archipelago and the detrimental impact of tourism in the local ecology. Criticizing ongoing American exploitation of her homeland, the issues depicted in Davenport's fictions is distinct from Anglo-Saxon natural writing in which the focal point is on preservation, pastoral and agrarian outlook. Davenport articulates the native Hawai'ians' ancestral epistemology concerning human and non-human relationship through *aloha aina* (respect and love to the land and all the entities) as a counter to the anthropocentric Western perception of nature. Moreover, her literature shares similar concern with the environmental justice movement that underlines the shared connection between marginalization of the ethnic minorities and the degradation of their environment. This present study applies environmental justice ecocriticism, as theorized by T.V Reed that ethnic literature functions as a cultural artifact which performs an advocatory role to articulate the resistance of the disempowered social group. To conclude, this paper argues that reconciliation between the indigenous people and the white majority is needed so that environmental sustainability can be achieved.

**Keywords:** Hawaiian Literature , *Aloha Aina* , Environmental Justice

## **1. Introduction**

Questions related to ecological sustainability has vastly become one unsolved problem in this modern era. This Anthropocene era, theorized by Paul Crutzen is a new geological epoch in which humankind has emerged as a globally transformative species, humanity began to suffer from the impact of the previously anthropocentric/human-centrist view. [1] Within the anthropocentric outlook, instead of designating nature with respect and care, forces of nature are seen as antagonistic to human practical and moral progress and is necessary to be overcome. [1] Countering the previously held-paradigm, modern view of technology is more skeptical by its potential destructive impact on the environment. The publication of the seminar book of modern environmental thought, *Silent Spring* (1962) by Rachel Carson that vividly capture the calamitous aftermath of DDT pesticide toward the local ecosystem contemplates the necessity of reorienting human and non-human relationship. With this environmental awareness comes the surge of modern environmental movements, mainly founded in the United States. [2] Conservation, preservation, and sustainability are the central tenets shared by the diverse variety of environmental movements.

Criticism arose from the realization that majority of environmental movements originated from the upper-middle class, white members of American society. Several theories, such as Rob Nixon, Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez Alier differentiate between the 'rich-nation

environmentalism' and 'environmentalism of the poor' of third world countries. [3] Guha, a notable critique of western environmentalism delivers a scathing attack on the hypocrisy of deep ecology movement. Within their concerns in eliminating the barriers between human and non-human by preaching equality of all species, they fail to recognize that within human society itself, inequality among racial lines remain an unsolved problem. In Guha's critique, the western environmental movements expose, "a lack of concern with inequalities within human society and how they are socially and historically produced." [4] He further contextualizes how the construction of American conservation park and wildlife preservation is established by the forced removal of the 'undesirable' indigenous Indian tribes.

An offspring of the wider environmental movement, environmental justice movements particularly concerns with the environmental hazard faced by ethnic minorities. This movement investigates the inequality of social distribution based on racial lines, how race continues to play an important role concerning the disproportionately amount of waste, pollution, emission and other toxicity being dumped in the ethnic minorities' neighborhood. [5] A central tenet of environmental justice is the shared connection between race and the environment, the oppression of one is connected to, and supported by, the oppression of the other. [6][7] Environmental justice criticizes the lingering paradigm of environmental racism which racially marginalized the ethnic minorities due to their supposedly closer connection to nature. As illustrated by Val Plumwood, environmental racism justifies and "rationalize the exploitation of animal (and animalized human) 'others' in the name of a human –and reason centered culture." [8]

The situation faced by the ethnic minority of Hawai'i, the *Kanaka Maoli* shares similar concerns with environmental justice movements. Since the arrival of the white (*haole*) settlers and the resulting colonialism, the native islanders had been marginalized in their ancestral archipelago. As summarized by Ireland [8], while the Native Hawaiians compose approximately 20 % of the state's population, they only rent or own one-tenth of its housing units, moreover their neighborhood tends to be of poorer quality. This disparity of status is further compounded by the *Kanaka Maoli*'s residential district exposure into environmental hazard.

Hawai'ian literature functions to articulate the voices of resistance towards the ongoing American colonialism, which is concealed behind the commodified image of Hawai'i as a paradise in the South Sea. In line with Crosby's assertion that colonialism also possesses 'a biological and ecological component' [9] Kiana Davenport -a native Hawai'ian writer – conveys the despoliation of her archipelago as the central theme of her fictions. She brings forward how the marginalization of the *Kanaka Maoli* in Wai'nae Coast, Kaho'olawe island and Hawai'i island is underlined also by the unhealthy, putrid, and highly polluted environment they are forced to inhabit. Davenport proposes the intertwined nature between the ecological hazards imperiled the *Kanaka Maoli* and their ostracized status as minority. Taking this paper's analysis of Davenport's literature into account, this present study argues that ecological sustainability cannot be achieved without firstly addressing the inequality based on racial lines.

## 2. Theoretical Background

On his article "Toward an Environmental Justice Ecocriticism" (2002), T.V Reed posits the necessity of enriching environmental justice movement by incorporating perspectives from the humanities discipline with environmental/eco-criticism. He argues that ecocriticism, while

well-positioned to deal with environmental issues as it is represented in literature remain subjected into white-centrist bias of Western environmentalism. Lioi summarizes the over-emphasis of environmental conservation and preservation while remains blind concerning ecological problems which directly affects ethnic minorities.

“White, middle-class environmentalism in the United States has often been guilty of protecting wilderness and its charismatic megafauna while ignoring the suffering of urban ecologies.” [10]

Echoing Glotfelty’s acknowledgement that ecocriticism ‘has been predominantly a white movement...and stronger links between the environment and issues of social justice is needed’ [11], Reed calls for the emergence of ‘environmental justice ecocriticism’. In his opinion, this criticism further the efforts of environmental justice movement by stressing “ how literature and criticism represents ways in which environmental degradation and hazards unequally affect poor people and people of color.” [12] Such criticism challenges the dominance of non-fictional nature writing by Western white writers by encompassing literature from ethnic minorities, dealing with issues such as dumping of waste, forced land appropriation and impact of pollution. Reed contextualizes how ethnic literature nature writing is both ecological and political, affirming how sustainable environment cannot be achieved without firstly addressing social inequity. Reed’s proposal affirms with the tenets of indigenous people’s movement for environmental justice, as exemplified here:

Environmental justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction .... Environmental justice calls for universal protection from extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water and food ....[13]

Environmental justice ecocriticism argues that the present stance of human-and-nature relationship should be reoriented through accommodation of indigenous environmental perspective. *Aloha aina* is the Hawai’ians’ indigenous environmental perspective that stresses the equality of human and non-human relationship. This terminology is considered to be more proper than the commodified and over usage of the term aloha. Aloha, which the original meaning is reciprocal love and generosity is ‘grotesquely commercialized’ by being labelled into all thing Hawai’ians to cater for the fetishized image of Hawai’i as a paradise. [14] *Aloha aina*, as advocated by the resistance group Project Kaho’olawe Ohana (PKO) strongly denounced the continuation of American exploitation of their home island, mainly in the form of military installation, nuclear and weapon testing, and dumping of toxic material in the Pacific Ocean. The Hawai’ian *Kanaka Maoli* perceives the land surrounding them with all its entities as part of their extended family (ohana) which deserves respect in a reciprocal relationship. By loving and caring for the land and sea, the Hawai’ians function as steward of their culture, promoting a strong and healthy foundation for its growth and perpetuation. [15]

### 3. Research Method

This study is a qualitative research in which the primary data is three novels written by Kiana Davenport, *Shark Dialogues* (1994), *Song of the Exile* (1999) and the *House of Many Gods* (2006). Qualitative research aims to explore and understanding individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. [16] The analysis is conducted by underlying several quotations of the texts which is analyzed from the framework of Post-Nationalist American

Studies. Post-Nationalist American Studies takes into account “the many different and constantly changing communities that constitute the United States” [17] instead of enforcing traditionalist American Exceptionalism belief of a singular American identity. Moreover, Post-Nationalist American Studies is interdisciplinary in nature, encompassing perspectives from post-colonial, ethnic studies, feminism, and environmental justice movement. [18] Post-Nationalist American Studies delves further into the complexities of environmental issues, especially the hazard faced by the discriminated ethnic groups. As articulated by Heise, this environmental turn in American Studies explores

the ways in which the representation of environmental issues is shaped by social inequalities, and on the necessity of political resistance in the face of persistent and disproportionate technological and ecological threats, especially to the health of women and minority communities. [19]

#### 4. Result and Discussion

Davenport’s trilogy chronicles the ongoing ‘ecological imperialism’ [20] which desecrate the close connection between the Hawai’ian natives with their surrounding landscape. She foregrounds the hitherto unexplored side of Hawai’i behind the commodified image of an isolated paradise. While she maintains vivid description of the lushness of Hawai’ian landscape in her fluid narration, her narration is marred with acts of ecological degradation which degrade the Hawai’ian countryside.

”it was like gliding across an old, old tapestry –farmers guiding ox teams through emerald rice paddies...the searching beauty and wealth of her birth-sands-that the whites are stealing away.” [21]

In line with the tenet of environmental justice movements, Davenport asserts how *Kanaka Maoli* is the most affected ethnic groups faced with ecological problems in Hawai’i. Instead of being able to self-sustain their life through fish-and-poi economy in the bygone era, the indigenous people are driven into slums around the newly constructed capital city of Honolulu. [21] This is particularly devastating to the *Kanaka Maoli* that their close connection to the land is hindered by despoiled and putrid environment they are forced to inhabit.

Davenport contextualizes how the *Kanaka Maoli* is further impaired by their exposure to ecological hazards such as toxic pollution and radiation from military installation. Her *Song of the Exile* (1999) conveys the starting point of American militarism of Hawai’i since the early period of Second World War. Honolulu in the 1940’s has become “a town of war nerves, the mighty whip of sirens. Everything rationed, beyond their means.” [22] The restrained civil liberty deeply impacted the *Kanaka Maoli*, under the justification of military necessity, the U.S navy confiscate vast tract of land owned by the native Hawai’ians for weapon testing and military installations. Years after the war ended, the looming specter of American militarism still lingers in this island chain. Davenport’s *House of Many Gods* situates the life of Ana Anehola in the neighborhood of Wai’nae Coast, thirty miles west of Honolulu. Living below the poverty line, the local inhabitants is forced to inhabit the abandoned Quonset huts, no longer used by the U.S Military.

She would huff along, passing dozens of Quonset huts on either side of the road, left over

from World War II, when the military occupied the land. Families lived in them now, and some were neat and hung with curtains, even miniature gardens. But some yards looked like dump sites—pyramids of rusted cars, skulls of hog heads, naked, running children, their bodies sequined with flies. [23]

Davenport foregrounds how the minimal exposure toward the ecological hazards affecting the *Kanaka Maoli* is further concealed by the ‘slow violence’ status of these threats. Nixon coins this terminology to underline ‘a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed given time and space, typically not viewed as violence at all.’ [24] On her fictions, Davenport expands on the environmental issues such as toxic pollution, dumping of waste and proposed tourist resorts which will damage the surrounding ecosystem. *Shark Dialogues* and the *House of Many Gods* explores the lingering presence of American military forces and the despoliation they caused, both toward the local islanders and the surrounding landscapes. As one example, Lualualei Naval Reservation is constructed nearby the Wai’nea coast, populated by the *Kanaka Maoli* instead of other residential area. As this military installation is hazardous to the nearby residents, located near native community is preferable rather than exposing the white citizens to radiation.

“You know what’s just down the road at Lualualei Naval Reservation? They got chemical and biological weapons stashed in underground arsenals. Why do you think that the whole valley is restricted? It’s also a nuclear-weapon depot. Armed soldiers patrolling day and night.” [23]

The ‘slow violence’ nature of the radiation waste caused this problem to remain unexposed, even to the local residents themselves. As the toxic gradually manifest, the people reside in the contaminated area remains unaware of this hazard until it is too late. Only the presence of Lopaka, a veteran of U.S Military who is knowledgeable to the inner working of the army and a vocal environmental activist who advocates the elimination of U.S Navy establishment in Hawai’i exposes this hidden truth.

“Frankly, that’s not what really bugs me. It’s the day-to-day stuff. Radioactive water from the harbors 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.” [23]

The western *haole*’s disregard toward *aloha aina* perspective, the necessity of harmony and balance among all species is also underlined through their grandiose plan to further develop tourist industry in Hawai’i. They remain subjected into anthropocentric paradigm and deterministic Western epistemology, how unused land is considered a wasteland (*terra nihilus*). [25] A dialogue in *Song of the Exile* illustrates the contrasting paradigm between white *haoles* and the *Kanaka Maoli*.

“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 Hawai’ians 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. [22]

From the prior passage, Vivian represents Western glorification of progress and disregard the seemingly backward indigenous way of living as proof of their stagnation. Vivian remains unaware on the sacredness of farming and taro-planting in Hawai'ian epistemology. According to Hawai'ian cosmic genealogy, these two activities underlines their ancestral ties from Papa "earth mother" and *Wakea* "sky mother" who first brought taro to the earth, hence symbolizes their familial relationship to the land and the taro. [14] Moreover, Davenport brings forward how the development in Hawai'ian tourism in form of beachside resort, luxurious hotel and other facilities will cause ecological catastrophe in the surrounding ecosystem. This devastation is contextualized in the subsequent passage

The villages were now threatened by that proposed \$900 million Riviera Resort, which will destroy everything in the area. Yacht basin, berth accommodating huge seagoing ships, would pollute the waters, scare of or kill all sea-life, deprive old-timers of their only food and income." [21]

Through her narration, Davenport advocates the necessity of empowering the agency of Hawai'ian's *Kanaka Maoli* in form of *Aloha aina* epistemology to challenge the *haoles'* anthropocentric outlook. Her novels perform an advocatory function "both in relation to the real world(s) it inhabits and to the imaginary spaces it opens up for contemplation of how the real world might be transformed. [26] Davenport proposes how *Aloha aina* perspective of the local islanders should be considered for a more ecologically sustainable environment. Yet the implementation of *Aloha aina* epistemology is hindered by several factors, mainly related to the limited agency of the indigenous people themselves. Moreover, the successful Western indoctrination to anthropocentric way of living and restriction of the traditional belief caused the *Kanaka Maoli* themselves or their descendant, the mixed-race/*hapa-haole* to be unaware of their ancestral legacy.

The hula was our oral history, how we remembered our genealogies. But, for over a hundred years, it was forbidden, along with our traditional art, Mother Tongue, our chants and prayers. In this way the missionaries cut out our tongues, cut off our arms. They wanted laborers, stoop workers for their sugar plantations, not intelligent natives. [23]

Several characters represented in Davenport's fictions, Ana in the *House of Many Gods* and Jess in *Shark Dialogues* represent their alienation of the ancestral paradigm of human and non-human relationship and the necessity of re-embracing this philosophy. Spending the majority of her life in metropolis San Francisco, her return voyage to Hawai'i is marked by her re-introduction of Hawai'ian closeness to the earth.

One night, hearing the wounded music of the sea, she runs barefoot to the beach and dives into moon-shot waves. She feels the harmony of things, the bliss of letting go.." [23]

Similarly, Jess, a *hapa-haole* in *Shark Dialogues*, a lawyer from downtown Manhattan experience what bioregionalism considers as dwelling -recognizing the environment in their proximity- and the importance of 'live mindfully and deeply in place'. [27] Davenport describes Jess' orientation through her sensory experience in Hawai'ian landscape.

Restless, Jess walked barefoot through starlit coffee fields, her senses reaching out to the land, the land giving itself back to her in luxuriant gifts: smells, night sounds, damp soil

underfoot, sea air detonating high in the roof of her mouth. [37]

Davenport concurs that direct action is necessary for the empowering of the marginalized social groups. Her fictions conceptualize how literature can function as a catalyst of social change concerning the *Kanaka Maoli*'s alienation by the dominant whites. Hawai'ian *Kanaka Maoli*'s literature, as exemplified by Kiana Davenport involves an 'aesthetics committed to politics' [38] Davenport stresses that resistance should be done through peaceful resolution instead of violently challenge the entrenched social regulation. *Shark Dialogues* underlines how the action of Vanya, a radical activist who affirms that 'terrorism in the new Mother tongue' as the rallying cry against American domination is ineffective. Davenport solemnly acknowledges that "They're blowing things up, yet nothing's changing for Hawaiians. Developers just bring in more cranes, rebuild the geothermal plants." [39] She asserts how contextualizing an alternative way of human and non-human relationship is more important for the implementation of *aloha aina* epistemology. Within the *Aloha aina* epistemology that stresses the equality of all species, ecological sustainably future is a possibility.

In restricted agency as a marginalized people in their own homeland *aloha aina* proves difficult to achieve as the anthropocentric Western view remains in primacy. *House of Many Gods* dramatizes the demonstration held by the indigenous residents of Wai'nae coast concerning the desecration of their surrounding environment. Their ancestral land is forcibly appropriated for the use of U.S military in weapon testing and bombing. Responding to the violence, both toward themselves and their *aina*, the villagers are united in demonstrating their protest.

Behind them, almost one hundred demonstrators spread out along the beach, pretending to be looking for homeless relatives. Then, on cue, they slowly unfurled their banners. NO MORE MILITARY BOMBING. GET OFF OUR SACRED LANDS. They stood waiting for the Marines to land and come ashore, wondering why the cops ignored them, why they lingered in the background. Finally, hot and tired in the sun, they formed small circles and sat down. [40]

Although their situation is harsh, bordering on desperate, the strong familial connection the Hawai'ians possess toward the environment as their fellow family members (*ohana*) cause them to persevere in their demonstration. Their action in caring for the *aina* resembles how grateful children express their appreciation to the dying ancestor,

Just down from the valley, homeless families had begun using Mākua Beach as a temporary residence, a *pu'uhonua*, or refuge. The elderly and the sick were brought here to lie in the nourishing sea and in the rock pools on the beach. People healed, and stayed, sweeping their beaches clean of garbage. They became once again *kahu o ka 'āina*. Stewards of the land. [41]

The local islanders' respect toward the nature is underlined by their attempt in restoring the degraded environment. The *Kanaka Maoli* embodies the bioregional tenet of reinhabitation, not only to minimize harm to the environment but to find ways of living that repair the environmental harm caused by previous reinhabitation. [42] Davenport asserts how the indigenous Hawai'ian's obedience into *Aloha aina* epistemology is the counter for the mechanistic and deterministic Western disregard of nature. This demonstration succeeded in launching a petition to the United Nation for review the circumstances concerning U.S

military presence in Makua Valley and eventually repel the military forces from the *Kanaka Maoli*'s homeland.

## 5. Conclusion

It can be concurred that Kiana Davenport's fictions advocates *aloha aina* philosophy, love and mutual respect between the indigenous islanders and their land as a possibility for a more ecologically sustainable future. This epistemology runs contrary into the anthropocentric Western paradigm that considers empty spaces as wasteland (*terra nihillus*) dan treat nature merely as commodities. In line with the environmental justice movements, Davenport's literature is political in tone, striving for equality between the local islanders and the white settlers. Her literature functions not only to provide an alternative environmental paradigm, but also intended to be a catalyst of direct social action. Empowerment of the ethnic minorities group is necessary before ecological sustainability can be achieved.

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