



Tasting Earth: Healing, Resistance Knowledge, and the Challenge to Dominion

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SUMMARY *This article explores an indigenous Hawaiian perspective on health that accords nature the status of healing agent. It reemerged in the Native Hawaiian decolonization struggle of the 1990s where it provided an explicit critique of Western sociocultural and political-economic forces, particularly of the effects these had on the bodies and souls of the colonized and neocolonized Hawaiians. This understanding of healing derives from the ancestors of present-day indigenous Hawaiians, as well as from the enduring ways of knowing and being that survives the onslaught of colonial power. Lying at the core of such understandings—expressed through the Polynesian principle of mana—are ideas about the interdependency between human beings and the earth. Thus, this article asks, how does mana become a basis for resistance? Can it be best understood by contrast to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic theology of dominion? While mana stresses interconnectedness with, love for, and dependence on nature, the biblical text (of Genesis 1:28) posits, in contrast, the separateness from and dominance over nature—a theology at the root of the 20th century, which this article concludes amounts to a politics of human dispossession and environmental degradation. [mana, healing, Hawaiian decolonization, dominion theology]*

This article explores an indigenous Hawaiian perspective on health in which nature is accorded the status of healing agent.¹ This perspective, which reemerged in the Native Hawaiian decolonization struggle of the 1990s, contains an explicit critique of Western sociocultural and political-economic forces, and the effects of these forces on the bodies and souls of colonized and neocolonized Hawaiians. The origins of this understanding of healing derive from the ancestors of present-day indigenous Hawaiians and from enduring ways of knowing and being that survived the onslaught of colonial power. Conceptions of the interdependency of human beings and the earth, which lie at the core of this perspective on healing, are expressed through the Polynesian principle of *mana*. To understand how *mana* is a basis for resistance knowledge, we will contrast it with the Judeo-Christian-Islamic theology of dominion. While *mana* stresses the interconnection of all living things and human love for and dependence on nature, the dominion of Genesis 1:28, in contrast, posits that humans are separable from and dominant over nature—a theology at the root of the 20th-century politics of human dispossession and environmental degradation.

My analytic frame lies at the intersections of health disparities, environmental injustice, and political power. Through these lenses it is clear that the planet has been degraded by the global spread of capitalism. It is less clear, however,

how humanity will survive the mortal and moral dilemmas of climate instability, eroding global reserves of petroleum, food and water scarcity, and the spread of new epidemics and chronic disease.

Resistance Knowledge

To confront these critical issues it is necessary to reach toward alternative horizons and stretch our sense of the possible. To do this work as scholars requires that we reinterpret the past in order to re-imagine the future and that we breach the borders of canonical wisdom to engage with peripheral, subaltern, and resistance knowledge and practices. To grasp the relationship between health disparities, environmental degradation, and social inequality and understand *mana*, we must draw on multiple sources from both nonscholarly and scholarly disciplines and traditions. Such resistance knowledge is critically important precisely because it is constantly delegitimized in the process of normalizing the world we now inhabit.

In arguing that a focus on peripheral knowledge and past wisdom can be a guide to present and future possibilities, I realize I open myself up to the charge of uncritically accepting golden myths of origins that reify a non-European past. However, I follow Anibal Quijano and others, who argue that unless we challenge a horizon “totally and exclusively occupied by the predatory needs of financial capital” (2002:82), we will have no future. Quijano argues that in emerging forms of Latin American social action it is not inevitable that “conventional Eurocentric versions” of the future will prevail. Rather, Quijano asserts that “people begin to act not only in response to their problems and needs, but also by appealing to their memory to define” their liberatory aspirations (2002:84). This opens the possibility for “parallel horizon[s]” of knowing and “non-Eurocentric rationalit[ies]” that can also redefine the future (2002:85).

In Hawai‘i during the 1990s the long struggle against U.S. conquest was invigorated under a cohort of leaders who remembered and reinterpreted ancestral knowledge. As the scholar Noenoe Silva (2004:2,16) has argued, Hawaiian resistance to foreign intrusion, which began with the first landing of Europeans, was evident throughout the 19th century and continues today. Through a careful exegesis of the Hawaiian language press from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-20th century, Silva brought to light the history of Native Hawaiian written resistance to U.S. conquest. From the moment of the first encounter with British and U.S. foreigners, the struggle for Hawaiian political and cultural integrity has not ceased. The form of struggle changed with historical circumstances, since the violent structural and cultural realities of being colonized meant that resistance was often expressed indirectly. Clearly, however, the resurgence in political and cultural activism that was evident in Hawai‘i in the late 20th century was in a historical tradition of resistance.² My research on this struggle focused on conceptions of health and on the resurgence of knowledge, which had been demoted and delegitimized in the process of colonization (Marshall 2011:2, 57, 78, 84, 95). Here the concept of health is broad and encompassing and rather than addressing specific illnesses, it connotes the sense of well-being. In the theories and practices that made up the decolonization movement in Hawai‘i, nature was understood as a catalyst for

healing the physical and psychic wounds of colonialism. Healing depended on reinterpretations of ancestral knowledge about the connection between humans and the earth and remembrance of specifically Hawaiian definitions of well-being, knowledge that the colonizer claimed was merely superstition. Decolonization, as a form of social and cultural healing, depended on dreaming, imagining, and remembering before and beyond the times of Western rule. And healing depended on recognition of *mana*, a cosmology at the core of Hawaiian life signifying the inseparability of land and people.

While I begin with the chain of islands called Hawai'i, I will end with reflections on resistance knowledge among struggling communities on the U.S. mainland and with possibilities for African American healing, remembering, and recovery.

Kinship between Humans and Earth

The islands of Hawai'i rise from the depths of the dark blue waters of the mid-Pacific, 4,000 miles east of Japan and 2,500 miles from the western edge of North America. This is the most isolated archipelago on earth. In the poetic language of the Kumulipo, the Hawaiian creation story, the islands emerge from the heat of the earth, the unfolding of heavens, and the eclipse of the sun by a round bright moon. In this origin story, the ancestors of Hawaiians were born from a "deep darkness, darkening" (Kame'elehiwa 1992:1-2).

These ancestors of present-day Hawaiians were self-governing, self-sufficient, and complete.³ Before the land was alienable, before sandalwood and whales were rendered nearly extinct, before the onslaught of settlers with desires to own the land, the islands overflowed with geothological significance. In this world, the *'āina* (or land) was comprised of conscious elements that communicated and interacted in relationships of mutuality, reciprocity, and familiarity across a spectrum of divinity, humanity, and nature. According to Luciano Minerbi, a professor of urban and regional planning,

In traditional Hawaiian thinking nature and land are considered sacred and animate. The world is a conscious entity and people can communicate with all species in nature and interact in a mutual relationship of rights and responsibilities. The Kumulipo (creation chant) implies that the universe is alive and conscious and that its evolutionary development comes from within. This evolution explains how man is related and is kin to nature. [1994:103]

Although the islands of Hawai'i were overwhelmed beginning in the late 18th century by Western economics, religion, and politics, the beliefs and practices of indigenous Hawaiians were never extinguished. Hawaiians endured. They survived deadly epidemics. They persisted through lethal narratives that portrayed their history, culture, language, and society as diseased and degenerate. And they also retained cosmologies centered on the reciprocity of humans and the land, even when these ways of understanding were driven underground by Western religion and economics. In the late 20th century, a burgeoning Hawaiian movement and an intense focus on reclamation of land, language, and health as a basis of decolonization demonstrated the potent *mana* of a people determined to thrive.

Dominion and Discommoning

In order to grasp the meaning of the Polynesian concept of mana, we must attend to the foundations of Western thinking about the land–human relationship. The notion that humans were separable from and dominant over nature was clearly articulated in the Hebrew Bible in Genesis 1:28, which reads: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and *subdue it*; and *have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (NRSV:2).

As dominion sundered human kinship from the land, in favor of mastery and subjugation, its disruption of human love for and dependence on nature, remained key to understanding the rise of capitalism as a social order and cosmology. Indeed, Quijano wrote about a sundering between mind and body, best articulated by Descartes, who replaced alternative notions in which “the two dimensions are always co-present, co-acting, never separated” (2007:53). Quijano argued that it is impossible to understand either the construction of race or of gender without attending to this radical dualism in which the nature–culture divide becomes a map of social hierarchies of difference.

Karl Marx began the analysis that led to his critique of political economy when he wrote “Debates on the Law on the Theft of Woods” in 1842 about the criminalization of the woodland commons of the Moselle Valley Peasants in Germany (Linebaugh 2008:144–145). In *Capital*, Marx identified the violence of land dispossession as the original sin of primitive capital accumulation (1977:873, 874). Primitive accumulation centered on brutal processes of discommoning, the expulsion of people from the land, and the conversion of common and collective property into private property; it meant the violent suppression of indigenous forms of production and consumption in the West and in the colonies in order to ensure a labor force for commodity production (Harvey 2005:145). As the historian Peter Linebaugh argues, European “communing” was a practice expressive of “relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature” (2008:279). Linebaugh cites a late-16th-century exposition on the multiple meanings of “common,” which included *communitas*, community, participation, and fellowship (2008:279).

At the end of the 14th century, English peasants possessed lands in common. But by the end of the 15th century, they had been forcibly removed from the land (Marx 1977:878). Driven by the rise of wool manufacturing, land that had been used for subsistence farming was transformed into enclosures for sheep (1977:879). In the course of the 18th century, in a process that foreshadows the colonial theft of land in Hawai‘i and elsewhere, laws were written that became instruments through which “the people’s land [was] stolen” (1977:885). Primitive accumulation, the enclosure of nature meant that land and people were no longer engaged in reciprocal processes. Indeed, it meant that the very meaning of humanity, of nature, and of well-being was transformed. Once the land was owned, the people followed. Linebaugh has argued that industrial capitalism in the Atlantic world rode into modernity on the backs of land enclosures and the slave trade. He wrote:

Together the expelled commoners and the captured Africans provided the labor power available for exploitation in the factories of the field (tobacco and sugar) and

the factories of the towns (woolen and cottons). Whether . . . [Europeans or Africans], the lords of humankind looked upon them indifferently as laboring bodies to produce surplus value, . . . which entirely depended upon a prior discommoning. [Linebaugh 2008:94]

By the end of the 18th century, the last traces of common land had disappeared in Europe (1977:883) and one hundred years later, Marx wrote, "the very *memory* of the connection between" people and the land "had . . . vanished" (1977:889). Marx described how the people were "forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded, and tortured by grotesquely terroristic laws into accepting the discipline necessary for the system of wage-labor" (1977:899). The roots of capitalism's health, and environmental crisis lie in this dispossession, in this sundering of earth and people.

The Meaning of Mana

This Western concept of dominion, of land enclosure, and of private ownership starkly contrasts with the Polynesian concept of mana. Based on notions of reciprocity, kinship, and love between gods, humans, and the land, mana is an indigenous ontology (Kame'eiehiwa 1992:31; Shore 1989:142; Valeri 1985:99). More than a theory, mana is a relationship and a practice that in precolonial times was the source of health, vitality, and abundance, in which a thriving world was the co-creation of divinity, humanity, and nature: fractal and indivisible.

The anthropological literature on mana sometimes misconstrued its meaning, beginning with Mauss who viewed it as a sign of social superiority, a quality accruing to powerful individuals rather than a result of proper social relations. The work of the anthropologists Raymond Firth, Valerio Valeri, and Bradd Shore, however, explored mana as a foundational social principle. Firth learned from his informants that the fecundity of the land and the people was "not merely a concatenation of physical forces but depend[ed] on the maintenance of a *relationship* between man and spiritual beings" (1940:505). Valeri's analysis of mana stressed relational reciprocity as central to the meaning of the term. He hypothesized that in Hawaiian cosmology, "god is clearly treated as a commensal who eats with his worshippers and is fed by them as they are fed by him" (1985:104). Following Firth and Valeri, Shore posited that mana was based on "the possibilities of exchange" between gods, humans, and nature. Mana, Shore argued, was a generative potency especially linked "to the two primary sources of human life: food and sex" (1989:165).

At the same time, the anthropological mana literature also reflected what Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006:206) have characterized as an "epistemology of imperial expansion" in which a Western scholarly observer makes "the rest of the world an object of observation." Through this imperializing lens, mana was cast as an artifact. Little scholarly work concerned itself with the meaning and currency of mana in late 20th century Polynesian societies (see Tomlinson 2006), and, until recently, the perspective of indigenous scholars on the significance of mana did not circulate in the global political economy of academic knowledge.

Late in the 20th century, though, scholars writing from a perspective that recognized the searing impact of colonialism reinterpreted the meaning of mana and demonstrated its relevance in a neo-colonial context.

The historian Lilikala Kame‘eleihiwa, for example, argued that “the lack of the Native point of view” in scholarship on Hawai‘i resulted in Eurocentric understandings of historical changes (1992:3). Following Denning’s 1980 work in *Islands and Beaches*, Kame‘eleihiwa placed the concepts and metaphors central to the worldview of Hawaiians in the time before the arrival of Westerners at the core of her historical analysis (1992:6). In *Native Land and Foreign Desires*, she defined the Māhele—the law allowing privatization of Hawaiian land that occurred in the mid-19 century—as a catastrophic moment for Native Hawaiians (1992:8, 11). In particular she analyzed the clusters of meaning around the concept of ‘Āina (land) and demonstrated that decentering European metaphors for land created the possibility for different historical interpretations.

Kame‘eleihiwa posited that the privatization of land in Hawai‘i was a profound disruption to Hawaiian life.⁴ Although commoner Hawaiians petitioned against the Māhele, their voices were not heard. A petition from three hundred Native Hawaiian citizens in 1845 urged the King to refuse both land and citizenship to foreigners. “If the Chiefs are to open this door of the government as an entrance way for the foreigners to come into Hawaii,” the petition argued, “then you will see the Hawaiian people going from place to place in this world like flies” (Petition 1845, cited in Kame‘eleihiwa 1992:331). The petitioners were prescient: the damage of the Māhele was sure and swift. The minimal bits of land commoners retained were soon lost, since these bits and pieces could not provide subsistence (Herman 1999:85; Levy 1975:857). These plots were soon purchased by foreigner plantation owners (Levy 1975:861) producing an abundance of dispossessed and impoverished Hawaiians. Landlessness and the inability to grow subsistence crops created widespread malnutrition, which exacerbated the spread of multiple epidemics (see Inglis 2005:238).

Native Hawaiian scholar-activists have analyzed the on-going experience of colonialism through lenses privileging the ethics and worldview of their ancestors. In the view of legal activist, Mililani Trask, dispossession was a key metaphor for colonialism. “Hawaiians were evicted from their land” she wrote,

that was genocide. Their ability to fish certain waters and cultivate land so that they could eat and live was taken away at the very time that Western diseases were taking a terrible toll. . . . The appropriate healing practices were almost lost because people who were oral keepers of those traditions died. Genealogies were lost, so people no longer knew who their families were. They were dispossessed of the land, they wandered, and they were not able to find their own families again. [1996:392]

Mana as Resistance

Beyond such historical considerations, however, the poet, political scientist, and Native rights activist, Haunani Trask, has asserted how the relevance of mana persists for Hawaiians in the current moment. She powerfully expresses the centrality of mana to the practices and aspirations of a people engaged in decolonization. In an essay titled “Writing in Captivity,” Trask observed that

“resistance to the strangulation of our people and culture is interwoven with a celebration of the magnificence of our nation: the lavish beauty of our delicate islands; the intricate relationship between our emotional ties to each other and our ties to the land; the centuries-old ways of caring for the land, the sea, and, of course, the mana that is generated by human beings in love with and dependent upon the natural world” (Trask 2000:52).

Manu Aluli Meyer, a scholar of education, has explored enduring differences between current Hawaiian and Western ways of learning and knowing. She has argued that the “ontological premise” of Hawaiian empiricism is the conception of the world as “alive and filled with meaning . . . and metaphor” (Meyer 1998a:39). For Meyer, the *relational* is a fundamental mode of Hawaiian knowing; it organizes experience, trains the senses, and establishes relevance. The land, the gods, and the people form a foundational web through which knowledge is drawn and made meaningful (Meyer 2001:127). In Hawaiian cosmology, taro is a fruit of the ‘āina, the historic staple food, and a synonym for the bonds of siblinghood. Thus, Meyer explores how a complex notion of “feeding” is a metaphor for contemporary Hawaiian knowing and understanding (1998b:23) based on the imperative of interdependence between people and land.

Scholars of mana have recognized the centrality of the concept of ‘*ai* (usually translated into English as *to eat, to feed, to consume*), and of its elaboration in the term ‘*āina* (land, sea, earth) in Hawaiian cosmology. In translation, the English words *food, eat, and land*, however, do not begin to approach the multivalent depth of the cluster of Hawaiian concepts centered on the root word ‘*ai*. Valeri (1985:104) uses the term *commensal* as way to translate the meaning of ‘*ai*. *Commensal* is defined as “eating together at the same table”; “living with, on, or in another, without injury to either”; and as a sociological term which connotes a person or group “not competing while residing in or occupying the same area as another individual or group having independent or different values or customs.”⁵ “Eat,” in contrast, means to “take into the mouth and swallow for nourishment” and to “consume by or as if by to devour gradually.”⁶ There is vast conceptual distance between ‘*ai* and *eat* and between concepts of commensality and of consumption that clearly mark differences in ontology and practice. These distinctions reflect the incommensurability of “dominion” and “mana.”⁷

From the perspective of scholars writing toward the goal of decolonization, mana remained an ontological exchange between the ancestors and their late 20th-century descendants, despite centuries of Western demotion of indigenous knowledge. This sustaining knowledge, this recognition of the “reciprocal codetermination” (Lewontin and Levins 2007:12) of all living things is exigent to the health of Native Hawaiians and is a foundational goal of decolonization (see Trask 1993, 2000). Colonialism in Hawai‘i is an injustice that occurred in the political-economic and sociocultural realms. But the injustices—the trauma of land dispossession, of political disenfranchisement, of changes in agricultural production and diet, and the community-wide disorientation that ensued from the enforcement of foreign practices and ideologies—were not experienced only as formal, abstract, and structural. The effects of these processes were etched deeply into the bodies and souls of the colonized. The long-term effects

of colonialism and neocolonialism on the health and well-being of Native Hawai'i in the late 20th century meant that reclaiming mana was urgent.

The effects of colonialism and neocolonialism were evident in the health status of Native Hawaiians, who had higher rates of morbidity and mortality from chronic and infectious disease when compared with other ethnic groups in the Islands and in the United States as a whole. The effects are seen on the land, which suffers inundation by tourists, by the U.S. military controlling a quarter of the land base on O'ahu, by diversion of streams for corporate food processing, and by the threat of unexploded military ordnance in places like Makaha Valley. This distribution of harm was a visible manifestation of centuries of colonial rule and of the sundering of indigenous Hawaiians from the land.

Native Hawaiians have developed theories about what makes them sick that are distinct from causal models in biomedicine and social epidemiology. Beyond a focus on pathology originating in the temporal, organic body and beyond the analytics of race, class, and gender in the spread of epidemic, Native Hawaiians offer an indigenous critique of health and disease in Western societies. From this perspective the etiology of disease can be located in Western economic and cultural practices.

Land as Healing Agent

Native Hawaiian understandings of health and disease emerged through aspirations for land reclamation, cultural integrity, sovereignty, and decolonization. This epistemology is fundamentally rooted in the mana cosmology, the traditions of ancestors, and in the history and memory of a colonized people.

The land as a place of healing and transformation was a major theme in the stories of staff and clients at Ho'o Mōhala, a Native Hawaiian-run drug treatment clinic that was the principal site of my Hawai'i research. These transformation narratives contradicted Western notions about treating disease as a process that should occur indoors, under professional supervision, and through purely biochemical processes, or about the individual as the unit of analysis and treatment. In narratives of transformation at Ho'o Mōhala, the 'āina (land) was understood as a catalyst for the achievement of well-being, clearly drawing on conceptions of mana in pre-European Hawaiian cosmology.

Alaka'i Ono, the clinical director, was an ex-convict, a recovering alcoholic, and drug addict. When I met him, he had been five years sober. He told me that when he was a teenager, he and a group of buddies would travel around O'ahu and break into tourists' rental cars. When he reflected on his past, he believed that his heavy drug and alcohol use cut off any other viable life options. Alaka'i told me that as a Hawaiian he was angry at all of the "rich tourists" and used that as a justification for his crimes. After spending time in prison, Alaka'i began the process of recovery—he was a client at Ho'o Mōhala in its first year of operation. In recovery he "learned other ways of being Hawaiian besides robbing tourists," including attending rallies and demonstrations supporting the sovereignty movement. But for Alaka'i, the most profound expression of "being Hawaiian" involved nature as catalyst for healing.

Shortly after joining the staff at Ho'o Mōhala, Alaka'i attended a staff immersion in Hawaiian language and culture at Waipi'o, a lush, verdant valley,

surrounded by the precipitous heights of the Kohala Mountain Range. The steep, nearly vertical cliffs limited access, thus Waipi'o was by-passed by most of the tourist trade.⁸ Ten Ho'o Mōhala staff members traveled to Waipi'o and met with a small group of Hawaiians, who deliberately spoke only the Hawaiian language, cultivated taro with irrigation canals, hunted, pounded poi (a traditional dish of fermented taro), and lived in thatch dwellings. The Ho'o Mōhala staff had to communicate in Hawaiian, although none of them were fluent. They slept in tents, pulled weeds in the taro ponds, and bathed in the ocean. For Alaka'i the trip was transformative. He explained to me that sleeping under the stars, communicating in Hawaiian, plunging his hands into muddy taro ponds, and eating poi made him feel proud to be Hawaiian. He decided then that he would eat poi at home and send his children to Hawaiian language-immersion school.

Susan Miller, a Filipino woman, and graduate of Ho'o Mōhala, told me how cynical she was when she was paroled from prison to drug treatment:

And how I got into Ho'o Mōhala . . . was, at that time they had a contract with the Department of Public Safety. And so Public Safety was paying for my treatment. So what the hell; you know? This is free. And I am going to stay here for t'ree months and clean up little bit and come back out and [keep on using drugs] . . . that's how I thought. . . . And I was there my first week and I was up at the [taro ponds] and it just overwhelmed me . . . I went through some kind of grieving. My first time being clean, I think. Clear of mind . . . the lo'i (or taro ponds) are so, . . . I don't know how to explain it. It is so spiritual up there. I felt at ease. I felt comfortable, I felt so relaxed. And I never felt that way for a long time. And I think that's what it was, that feeling of being free.

The taro ponds at Mt. Ka'ala Cultural Learning Center were part of a community garden, a sprawling series of ponds fed by irrigation canals that predate European contact. Located high in the valley, surrounded by the Wai'anae range, and with a stunning view of the sea, volunteering at Mt. Ka'ala was a regular part of the treatment program at Ho'o Mōhala. Susan's experience at Mt. Ka'ala was not uncommon; many people who worked or volunteered at the Center spoke of its intense beauty, spirituality, and ability to heal.

Kili Simmons was a middle-age Hawaiian woman diagnosed with bipolar disorder and substance addiction. In a Native Hawaiian women's support group, Kili told stories of violence and disease going back to the time of her grandparents. Sometimes Kili would wail and cry and rock; her pain was immense. She told stories about incest: she was raped by her grandfather, molested by her uncle, and she told stories about her father beating her mother and then turning his anger towards her. As a child, when she felt threatened, Kili would run away seeking refuge. "In small kid times, I was an abused child. My father fought my mother and then he fought me. I used to hide in the space under the house to get away from them, but when I really wanted to get far away, I would run up into the mountains. Up in the mountains there were birds and guava trees and I always felt safe. I would lie on the ground and I remember the smell of the [taro pond], it was a certain sweet earthy smell. . . . And I remember the leaves of the taro, which are shaped like a heart, bending as they were blown by the wind. It was like the taro leaves were waving to me."

Nurturing the Body–Soul

Taro, the basis of poi, was once the staple food of indigenous Hawaiians, but in the industrial food system that now dominates, taro became scarce and expensive and Hawaiians were forced to consume less nutritious white rice and white potatoes. The theological origins of food and food's kinship with humanity are core principles of mana and a basis of Native Hawaiian critiques of Western models of health and disease. The taro plant is understood both as a means of nourishment and as an elder sibling: a metaphor for origins and belonging. In the cosmology of Hawai'i, the origins of taro are the origins of humanity. The Hawaiians I worked with expressed their reverence for taro in a locally produced cookbook written for those who were engaged in returning to more traditional diets. The cookbook told the story of taro's origins as the shape-shifting, stillborn, first child of Wākea (sky father) and Papa (earth mother). In the space where the baby was buried, a plant sprouted and soon produced many offshoots, becoming bountiful. Thus, taro is the firstborn child of the gods, humans are the second. The cookbook states, *Ka po'e kahiko* or the ancestors said that it was the will of God that taro was born first, for he provided the necessary food for all those who came later (*Wai'anae Coast Comprehensive Health Center 1995:10*, see also Handy et al. 1991:80).

In this Hawaiian view, the natural, spiritual, and human worlds are irrevocably enmeshed. The gods and ancestral spirits are evoked and incarnated in and through food and the land. Identity, kinship, and place are then thoroughly interconnected. The vitality of each individual is transmitted genealogically, but also through substances that dwell in the land. According to Davianna McGregor, who conducted research on the persistence of traditional customs and practices in late 20th century Hawai'i, "the land is not a commodity to [Hawaiians] . . . The land is a part of their [family] and they care for it as they do the other living members of their families" (1996:16).

In Hawaiian cosmology, then, both humans and nutritional food share the same origins, the same substance. Indeed, the primogeniture of taro illustrates the dependence and love between humanity and sanctified land. But what happens to kinship and identity, when transnational corporations become the source of nutrients? How does an exploited labor force and mass cruelty to animals affect health? What mana dwells in a Big Mac or a Whopper with cheese? From the perspective of Hawaiian cosmology (one informed by an epistemological critique of what the Western world lacks), the danger of ingesting fast foods is not simply about sodium, fat, cholesterol, and the risks of physical degradation but, rather, the risk in the danger of cultural and spiritual extinction, since being Hawaiian depends on nurturing the body with food produced on ancestral lands.

Drawing the link between Native Hawaiian political powerlessness, disease, landlessness, and poverty was a central project of the decolonization movement. At the end of the 20th century, Native Hawaiians struggled with hunger, homelessness, joblessness, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and a land base overwhelmed by the tourist economy and the military. In *Wai'anae*, the site of my research, a cohort of leaders sought to mobilize the community by involving them in projects that addressed their immediate needs, as well as

the larger issues of power, cultural integrity, and decolonization. The community of Wai‘anae is a semisuburban, semi-rural space on the periphery of Honolulu. Farrington Highway was the only public road in Wai‘anae that connected with Honolulu and the rest of the O‘ahu. The highway hugged the coastline and was punctuated by Burger Kings, McDonalds, Taco Bells, and convenience stores. Near the highway, built on lands specifically set aside for Native Hawaiians, several suburban-style tract-housing settlements contrasted with the rural scene in the upland valleys. In the upland valleys of Wai‘anae (where the sounds of exploding ordnance from a nearby U.S. military base could be heard echoing off the mountains), families still lived in Quonset huts (sold by the military as surplus after World War II), and the land was zoned for agriculture.

The executive director of the Opelū Project (a Wai‘anae organization focused on community gardening and aquaculture), Puanani Burgess told me that what drew people into larger political processes were not theories about oppression. “In poor communities like Wai‘anae,” she said, “projects and programs are based on questions like: ‘why can’t we feed ourselves,’ ‘why can’t we heal ourselves,’ or just simply, ‘why can’t we?’ It is these questions which encouraged involvement.”⁹ “Political activism,” she said, “and the language of ‘issues’ often obscured what was most important. Issued words like racism, injustice, and oppression ‘masked’ the simple reality of ‘my babies only have the worst food.’” For Burgess a focus on health and food held the potential of bringing even the most marginal Native Hawaiian women into the political process because, she said, “food . . . [and] health . . . so touch the lives of everyone.”

Coda

These stories from Hawai‘i illustrate how resistance knowledge, circulating as theories and practices of healing form the basis for real challenges to Western notions about health, nature, and the constitution of power. Stuart Kirsch, who conducted research on social and environmental relations in New Guinea, has similarly argued for a “reverse anthropology” meant to “enhance recognition of indigenous modes of analysis . . . and interpretive capacities . . . and to acknowledge and benefit from the resulting insight(s)” (Kirsch 2006:222). But it is not just in places like Hawai‘i and New Guinea where resistance epistemologies and modes of interpretation are being produced and exercised. There are thriving, though beleaguered, health justice movements based in poor communities of color in the mainland United States. The scholar Giovanna Di Chiro persuasively argued that in contrast with mainstream health and environmental justice organizations, local grassroots groups have different understandings about human health and the environment. Many grassroots organizations start with the assumption that the “daily realities and conditions of people’s lives” should be at the center of any health justice discourse and practice. They problematize the hostile nature–culture dichotomy and insist that struggling communities of color are also “endangered species” (Di Chiro 1996:299, 301–02). This merging of health, environmental, and social justice issues opens different possibilities for transformation and catalyzes processes of remember-

ing and redefinition (Di Chiro 1996:303). Environmental health scholar Jason Corburn has argued that “political power hinges in part on the ability to manipulate knowledge and to challenge evidence presented in support of particular policies” (Corburn 2005:201). “Ultimately,” he wrote, “expertise, whether called professional or local, is a political resource exploited to justify political decisions; it is not an objective truth” (Corburn 2005:201). Corburn’s book *Street Science: Community Knowledge and Environmental Health Justice* explored how residents of Brooklyn draw on rich contextualized knowledge often unattainable by outsiders to solve the environmental health problems in deindustrialized urban neighborhoods. Street science, he argued, improves academic scientific information, provides a method for community organizing, and a way of intervening that is contextually relevant (2005:216). Most importantly, Corburn argued that community-based knowledge production is a basis for resistance, action, and intervention by urban residents disenfranchised by a neoliberal state regime that personalizes and depoliticizes inequality.

Statistics on African American health and mortality indicate significant disparities when compared with the health and mortality of white Americans. Black babies, for example, are four times as likely to die from complications of low birth weight than non-Hispanic white babies.¹⁰ African Americans are twice as likely to have diabetes as non-Hispanic whites, and one and a half times as likely to have hypertension.¹¹ Food related illnesses such as diabetes and hypertension flourish in the absence of sources of nutritious food. In Detroit, a city with a population that is over 80 percent black, it is estimated that half the population lives in neighborhoods “either lacking or far away from conventional supermarkets.”¹² Furthermore, African Americans and other people of color are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation. African Americans are 79 percent more likely than whites to live in neighborhoods where industrial pollution is suspected of causing the gravest health dangers.¹³ While the concept of mana and contemporary indigenous Hawaiian understandings of the term depend on access to a deep well of cultural–historic and community knowledge, the meaning of mana as a relationship between humans, earth, and the divine productive of social health and well-being has correlates across cultures and historical epochs. By weaving together current understandings of mana with Marx’s analysis of the brutal processes of discommoning in Europe and Africa during the origins of capitalism, I am suggesting that liberatory aspirations, drawing on memories in which humans are contained within and not opposed to nature are possible, even for African Americans in urban settings on the U.S. mainland.

The urban garden movement in the United States, situated at the juncture of health, environment, and community organizing, holds great promise. At an urban garden in Charlottesville, Virginia, children were surprised by the sweet, crunchiness of a freshly harvested carrot, since few had tasted carrots that had not come out of a can. Their grandmothers embraced the sautéing of Swiss chard and recalled meals plucked fresh from family plots in their rural, Southern childhoods. Addressing health disparities and environmental degradation in low wealth communities, urban farming encourages remembering and

reinterpreting, and seeing beyond the limits of private control over the means of sustenance, in order to relearn and reclaim alternative cultural and political meanings of food, land, and health.

I end with a passage from Alice Walker's essay "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience," because it suggests the potency of *African American* memory and knowledge in the struggle for health justice. Implicitly, Walker argued that dominion is an ideology of city dwellers that fails to recognize the love and reciprocity between humans and the earth that sustains rural communities.

Walker writes:

Perhaps my northern brothers will not believe me when I say that there is a great deal of positive material I can draw from my 'underprivileged' background. But they have never lived, as I have, at the end of a long road in a house that was faced by the edge of the world on one side and nobody for miles on the other. They have never experienced the magnificent quiet of a summer day when the heat is intense and one is so very thirsty, as one moves across the dusty cotton fields, that one learns forever that water is the essence of all life. In the cities it cannot be so clear to one that he is a creature of the earth, feeling the soil between the toes, smelling the dust thrown up by the rain, loving the earth so much that one longs to taste it and sometimes does. [1983:21]

Health and environmental justice projects in the United States, particularly urban gardening, suggest it is becoming clearer that even in cities, one is a creature of the earth, and even on the U.S. mainland, memories of kinship with nature survive.

Notes

1. During fieldwork in the 1990s, the majority of my collaborators and informants identified as Native Hawaiian. They were also ethnically mixed with Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, and Puerto Ricans, among others. While the culture and ethos that defines *mana* is Hawaiian, those for whom the concept is meaningful may be themselves ethnically mixed, since the transmission of culture is not limited by biological notions of race. Native Hawaiians are a statistical minority in terms of statewide population, with various Asian groups (including Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos) and whites predominating. In the 2010 US Census, Native Hawaiians comprised 10 percent of the state's population.

2. In the 1990s the sovereignty and cultural revitalization movements in Hawai'i contained an array of positions, politics and tactics, fraught with internal critiques, debates about strategy and meaning, and divisions about the ultimate goals of the movement. Various strands of the movement, however, shared a commitment to the revitalization of indigenous Hawaiian culture, even while they disagreed about acceptable forms of political autonomy.

3. To claim that the world of Hawai'i before the arrival of Europeans was "complete" is to hermeneutically challenge the implied teleology of Western conquest and disarrange the sense that indigenous people were less than complete before collision with Western societies.

4. See also Merry (2000:95) who argued the *Māhele* transformed land use that was based on reciprocal relations between the commoner Hawaiians and the ruling elite. In place of this relationship based on genealogy and rank, the *Māhele* introduced relations of inequality based on property ownership and the market.

5. <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=commensality>. Accessed on March 26, 2009.

6. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/eat>. Accessed on March 26, 2009.
7. The philosopher John Patterson's (2000) exploration of the meaning of mana in Maori culture argues for the possibility of mana as the ontology of an environmental philosophy suitable to Western cultures. He argued that in order to understand mana, Westerners must grasp the "web of relationships" between the natural and the supernatural, between the past and the present, and between Oceania and the rest of the globe (2000:233). The relational web implied in the concept of mana, the notion that kinship encompasses all things living and divine, however, has not been grasped in the power centers of global capitalism. Western adoption of mana as a basis of environmental philosophy would require a thorough understanding of the theological, sociocultural and political-economic implications of the vast epistemological difference between the concept of 'ai and the concept of "eat." Deleuze's (2006) concept of "impossibility" articulates the skepticism with which we might view Patterson's desire for the Western adoption of mana as ontology. Deleuze (2006:60) cited Leibniz's notion that the Christian God chooses from "infinity of possible worlds." God, Deleuze wrote, chooses the world "that has the most possible reality." Alternative worlds are "impossible." Dimakopoulou's (2006:81–82) elucidates Deleuze's notion of impossibility with reference to the transition from the European baroque period to the neo-Baroque era, and from modernity to postmodernity. According to Dimakopoulou,

Deleuze writes that the transition from the baroque to the neo-baroque is marked by the absence of the principle of convergence according to principles of preestablished harmony and the impossibles enter the arena of fragmentation. . . . The dissonant coexistence of impossible "events," can be read as an allegory of the transition from modernity onto postmodernity: a cultural and historical condition in which more than one [virtuality is] actualized . . . a world that witnesses the transition from "harmonic closure" to . . . "polyphony of polyphonies." [Dimakopoulou 2006:81–82]
8. In Kiana Davenport's 1995 novel *Shark Dialogues*, Waipi'o valley is represented as a refuge for armed sovereignty movement revolutionaries who are waging guerilla warfare against the tourist industry.
9. Interview with Puanani Burgess. Wai'anae, Hawai'i. January 7, 1997.
10. Office of Minority Health, "Infant Mortality and African Americans," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2011).
11. Office of Minority Health (2010).
12. Steven Gray, "Can America's Urban Food Deserts Bloom?" (2009).
13. United Church of Christ (2007).

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