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The Plantation as Contested Territory:
Aloha ‘Āina and Indigenous Resistance in *Shark Dialogues*

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Abstract

Shark Dialogues (1995) by Kiana Davenport introduces a critical question often overlooked in Hawaiian plantation literature: not only how communities survived, but whose ‘āina (land) was taken. Davenport addresses this through Pono, a Kānaka woman whose story reveals the plantation’s impact on land, bodies, and family lines, from forced labor on the ancestral land to the reclamation of 300 acres lost due to the stigma of colonial disease. This article examines reclamation through Aloha ‘Āina, the deep relationship between the lāhui Hawai‘i and the land, and argues that Davenport presents it as an ongoing political practice rather than a narrative conclusion. Pono passes this responsibility, or kuleana, for ancestral land to her hapa granddaughters based on practice rather than documented bloodline. Thus, land-based practice, not racial purity, becomes central to Kānaka identity.

Keywords: Aloha ‘Āina; Hawaiian plantation literature; Indigenous land reclamation; settler colonialism; Kānaka Maoli

1. Introduction

In 1920, the United States Congress instructed Hawai‘i’s territorial government to return some of the lands taken from Native Hawaiians during the Māhele (land division) of 1848, leading to the passage in the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act. However, what was returned was not

the productive sugar land – which would have been worth more than 26,000 acres – but rather a relatively worthless expanse of leased government forest. Davenport's protagonist, Pono, on the way to Honolulu, notices it: “Instead of verdant little acres where people could plant small gardens and live on a fish-and poi-economy, what Pono saw were sad little home- stead plots on barren lands, no irrigation, no forest, or running water” (105). She explains how she interprets this as both a sign of land being tortured by monoculture, and of broken promises written in places on the landscape.

The protagonist of *Shark Dialogues* is a woman named Pono. A generational saga, the novel begins in Honolulu in the 1850s, during the height of the Hawaiian monarchy. At that time, foreigners swarmed into Hawai‘i, diseases spread, and native Hawaiians suffered ‘a population collapse of nearly 90% in less than 70 years (Kuykendall, 1: 70). Davenport emphasises the aftermath of the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian kingdom and its devastating consequences for Hawaiian sovereignty and independence. Pono’s grandparents and parents lose their wealth and social status because of their pro-monarchy stance among the so-called ‘stone eaters’ (‘ai pōhaku), who refuse to “swear allegiance to the traitors who have ravished [their] land” (Davenport 67). The love for the land is a driving theme in Davenport’s novel, with Pono’s fierce loyalty to her heritage and later to the man she loves.

The Indigenous Hawaiian value of Aloha ‘āina guides Pono’s story. Aloha ‘Aina is an active cultural and ecological philosophy most commonly translated word for word in English as “love for the land,” but it has further connotations, “including love for the land and the people of the land” (Fujikane, *Mapping Abundance for* 45). As Candace Fujikane argues in another article,

this love is also one that stands for the political independence of the lāhui Hawai‘i. Both a verb and a noun, Aloha ‘Āina is the direct action born out of Kānaka Maoli radical resurgence at the same time that Kānaka Maoli embody Aloha ‘Āina as the people who stand for lands, waters, and the lāhui. (“To Breathe the Akua” 77)

Aloha ‘āina is itself an action plan; sovereignty cannot and does not exist without it. Aloha ‘āina could not only restore the integrity of the militarily abused Hawaiian land, but could be the basis of a new Kānaka Maoli lahui (nation). This offers an ecologically mindful alternative to the boundary-oriented concept of the nation (Dessouky 254) because “where nationalism and patriotism tend to exalt the virtues of a people or a race, Aloha ‘Aina exalts the land” (Silva 11).

Scholars have observed a recurring pattern in Asian immigrant plantation literature: laborers suffer, endure, and ultimately transcend their conditions (Patterson 84). Milton Murayama's trilogy offers a conspicuous exception. Across *All I Asking for Is My Body*, *Five Years on a Rock*, and *Plantation Boy*, he refuses the redemption narrative, fixating instead on hereditary debt and the plantation's immovable hierarchies. In fact, Stephen H. Sumida, speaking of Murayama's portrayal and Grant's idealized narrative, does present this history – “as clear a majority as one might muster in a society sharply aware of its diversity, its pluralism” (114) – and so claims the immigrant experience as the 'correct' point of view for viewing plantation history. Similarly, authors like Alan Brennert in his book *Honolulu* (2009), tell the story of immigrant workers, like a Korean picture bride, who rise from laborers to successful business owners and citizens of a multicultural society.

The scholarship on Asian immigrant experience on Hawaiian plantation has been well-documented. The scholars converge on the migrant subject as a site of resistance, but diverge on the question of whose land that migrant inhabited. Tim Libretti identifies a “pan-Asian, working-class nationalist consciousness” emerging from shared exploitation across ethnic lines (34). From class, the conversation moves to culture. Benzi Zhang argues that Hawai‘i Creole English “problematize[s] the unique identity and cultural differences of Japanese-Americans in Hawai‘i” by marking local belonging against mainland norms (31). The body offers yet another register. Lastly, Morris Young reads the plantation as a site where “racialized body, language, and education intersect” in struggles against colonial extraction (63).

Local Asian settlers, as Eiko Kosasa has shown, have gained their hegemony largely by buying into a “nation of immigrants” ideology that

ignores Native Hawaiian claims to land (23). As Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura argues,

Asian political and economic “successes” in Hawai‘i have been represented as evidence of Hawai‘i’s exceptionalism as a multicultural state, proof that Asians have been able to overcome the racist treatment and policies of the American sugar planters to form what several scholars have described as a harmonious multiculturalism. (3)

What this shows is how displaced Native Hawaiians have become, with Sumida claiming that immigrant workers are the “clear majority” of Hawai‘i (114), and thus relegating native people to performing a background role on their own land. However, this framing erases the fact that it was through legal and military interventions – the Māhele, the Bayonet Constitution, the 1893 coup – that minority status was established. So, unlike in the case of Murayama’s trilogy, there is no mention of the Māhele and an absence of any reference to the overthrow. Treating the plantation as an institution in nature essentially marginalizes, rather than colonializes, the Oyama family. In the end, this dismissal silences the entire previous claim to land.

Recent scholarship on Davenport’s fiction has begun to address this gap. Anthony Carrigan reads *Shark Dialogues* through the lens of tourism and cultural commodification (187); Kirsten Møllegaard examines shark symbolism and Indigenous epistemology (7). Kristiawan Indriyanto and Lilis Napitupulu argue that Aloha ‘Āina in the novel functions as a multicultural lens that extends beyond its Kānaka origins to articulate a shared land ethic across ethnic lines. They argue how “the novel ultimately redefines Hawaiian identity by presenting Aloha ‘Āina as an inclusive practice that builds solidarity and supports Indigenous resilience in postcolonial Hawai‘i” (150). This article follows from these contributions, while shifting the focus back onto the plantation.

2. The Historicity of the Hawaiian Plantation

‘Āina cannot be translated simply as “land.” Ku’ualoha Ho’omanawanui, defines it as “the land that can nurture and sustain life by providing food,

including the majority of environments from the ocean to the highest mountaintops; it is the land that provides food for all living things, not just humans” (124). Hawaiians, as descendants of the land and the akua (divine ancestors), are taught to practice mālama ‘āina (care for the land) with the same devotion shown to kūpuna (elders) and siblings (Trask 123). As Manulani Aluli Meyer states:

Indigenous people are all about the place. Land/‘Āina, defined as “that which feeds,” is everything to our sense of love, joy, and nourishment. This is not a metaphor . . . You came from a place. You grew up in a place and 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. (219)

The colonization of nature thus relies upon a range of conceptual strategies that are employed also within the human sphere to support the supremacism of nation, gender and race. This construction of non-humans as Others involves both distorted ways of seeing sameness, continuity or commonality with the colonized Other, and distorted ways of seeing their difference or independence (Plumwood 53).

The Māhele of 1848 did the legal work, though not, at first, toward the outcome it eventually produced. “The goal of the missionaries, haole government advisers, and the monarchy – which had tight control over land and labor and thus could effectively block the development of plantations – was small cane farming and contracted agreements between farmers and mill owners” (Kessler 151).

Descendants of American missionaries, using their connections to the monarchy, passed laws that made way for much larger operations than small cane farms (Kessler 129). In the process, the ahupua‘a (traditional Hawaiian land division) disappeared. “All of the ahupu'a were given names, and their boundaries carefully defined. Nearly every ahupu'a was a track of land extending from the summit of the mountain to the sea and on to the outer edge of the reef” (Williams 44). Reflecting on the plantations' growth, Carol MacLennan states that “the larger industrial plantations of the 1890s occupied two thousand to three thousand acres and employed up to one thousand workers or more” (“Hawai'i Turns to Sugar” 98). She

further adds that the largest plantation of 1890, Hawaiian Commercial and Sugar Company on Maui, produced nearly 12,000 tons of sugar alone (99).

In 1887, the Honolulu Rifles seized strategic points in Honolulu, and mounted armed patrols forced the ruling monarch, King Kalakaua, to sign what became known as the “Bayonet Constitution,” a document stripping him of his most important executive powers and diminishing the Kānaka Maoli voice in government (Trask 14-15). The king was no longer able to appoint members to the House of Nobles. The Bayonet Constitution created an oligarchy of the haole (white) planters and businessmen by primarily empowering white Americans and Europeans. The new constitution gave U.S. citizens the right to vote in Hawaiian elections, while a large sector of the Kānaka Maoli electorate was excluded through rigorous property qualifications, with Asians entirely disenfranchised as aliens (Osorio 244).

The social hierarchy mirrored the legal one, as Noenoe K.Silva points out:

Because of their language and their access to cash, most haole were able to send their children to select schools, while most Kānaka Maoli had to be content with common schools. At the same time, on the developing plantations, the owners and luna were haole, while the field laborers were Kānaka Maoli or Asian immigrants. (Silva 46).

Whoever supervised the cane fields also decided which schools existed for whose children, and the result was dispossession that travelled across generations rather than stopping at the property line.

The labor problem became serious as the Kānaka Maoli population dropped sharply. A succession of plagues struck the Hawaiian Islands during the last four months of 1848 and the early part of 1849 (Inglis 8). Measles, whooping cough, dysentery, and influenza raged across the kingdom (Inglis 9-10). An estimated 10,000 persons died from these causes, more than one-tenth of the population (Schmitt and Nordyke 6). New diseases, the disruption of traditional food systems by single-crop farming, and continued losses caused this population to collapse. To deal with this, plantation owners brought in contract workers from Japan, Korea, China, and the Philippines to farm land that no longer supported its

original communities. As late as 1936, despite the end of Japanese immigration in 1924 and the subsequent labor recruitment of Filipinos, a majority of the plantation work force was still Japanese (54 percent) who were followed by Filipinos (32 percent) (Okamura 1-2). MacLennan argues that “One hundred years of sugar's expansion changed the face of Hawai'i. By 1920, it had propelled the islands into a place devoted almost exclusively to cane and the other industries that served sugar's purposes” (*Sovereign Sugar* 50).

In the sweep of Hawai'i's natural and human history, the change from an indigenous Hawaiian subsistence economy to one driven by export-oriented agriculture spans just a few decades. It happened quickly and completely. The first Western-style sugar plantations appeared amid Hawaiian communities in the 1840s (Kuykendall, 1: 50-52). Plantation agriculture took off in the 1880s with large infusions of capital. By 1920, sugar had remolded the islands into a production machine that drew extensively on island soils, forests, waters, and its island residents, to satisfy North America's sugar craving (Kuykendall, 3: 89-94).

3. Stolen 'Āina, Severed Genealogies: The Plantation as Instrument of Kānaka Maoli Erasure

Pono enters the plantation as the inheritor of intergenerational violence. Born in the early decade of 1900's, she symbolizes the old generation and tradition of Hawai'i. Since her youth, Pono possesses the ability of a kahuna (shaman), through her reserve of mana/spiritual energy. She can see the future in the form of dreams, learning naming chant for newborn babies and healing chants for diseases. She foresees the future of Hawai'i, how “the future will kill them (the Hawaiians). The slums would grow into ghettos, sub-cities of Honolulu. The searing beauty and wealth of her birth-sands, that whites were stealing away” (Davenport 105). She sustains herself from her ability of dream-teller and healing prowess, “in return for meals, she would dreams-see for them, trying not to lie” (Davenport 104).

Her lineage is part of the history of Hawaiian resistance. Her great-grandmother, Kelonikoa, fought in the counter-revolution of January

7, 1895. This was an attempt to restore Queen Lili‘uokalani two years after the illegal corporate-military overthrow (Davenport 154). Davenport treats the defeat of this uprising as a final foreclosure. It was the last organized moment to reverse the trajectory set by the Māhele and the Bayonet Constitution. Those still living in Hawai‘i are emotionally alienated from family and community and those living away from Hawai‘i are both emotionally and physically separated from their families and their pasts. Their identities have been determined by their positions within a colonial order.

Historical irony becomes clearer when Pono arrives in Kona. At that same time, the United States Congress was passing the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act of 1921. Looking back toward Honolulu, she sees the deception in the changed landscape: “Over 26,000 acres of developed sugar land became available. But this was not what was returned to Hawaiians” (Davenport 174). MacLennan’s view is clear; the landscape has become a “system of resource and labor exploitation for North American sugar” (*Sovereign Sugar* 3). The land no longer acts as a simple background, it stands as proof of theft.

Physical land was not the only thing this machinery took. Pono’s parents endure “sunbaked years” in the fields, their palms “dense with calluses”, red dirt “settling into hair roots, into bowels and lungs” (Davenport 85). Davenport’s tone is both factual and outraged as she describes how indentured Hawaiians and immigrant workers “could be bought and sold,” how they toiled 12 to 15 hours a day for some mere cents, were given no running water or sewage systems in the camps, and faced “floggings or shootings by sadistic Portuguese and Scotch luna” (Davenport 78). These harrowing details are just a glimpse into the novel’s raw and unflinching portrayal of the awful working and living conditions of enslaved Hawaiians and Asians. Trang Dang describes how “through its directness and fury, *Shark Dialogues* exposes the cruelty of colonial rule, compelling readers to confront its lasting injustices and demanding a just reflection and response” (4). The workers are treated the same as their crops, merely as commodity that exist for the benefit of the haole owners. One event that underlines the parallelization of indigenous people with nature is the false accusation that the Kānaka labourers are

running a distillery, selling bootleg liquor. With their labour easily “bought and sold” and their lives exploited and determined by settlers, they are indeed reduced to the level of other non-human entities in Hawai‘i: “One day when she was thirteen, four haole cradling rifles rode towards the plantation. Workers ran for their pistols while the horses were still trotting specks. . . . A man leaned down from his horse, whacking Ben with his rifle butt” (Davenport 103).

For a time, Duke Kealoha was a different example. After being afflicted with leprosy, Duke is forced to abandon his family and is forcibly taken to Kalaupapa in Moloka‘i. While at first his wife Pono remains able to manage Kealoha’s abandoned coffee plantation in Kona, Hawai‘i, harassment from the fellow villagers toward their children forced her away from this island. This episode is represented in the following excerpt: “She felt eyes examining her brood, heard a voice, loud, unforgettable. ‘. . . kamali‘i o ma‘i Pākē.’ Children of leprosy. All over Kona District, people associate the Kealoha family with ma‘i Pākē. Our daughters would be ostracized” (Davenport 164).

Alexander Cheung’s research illustrates how the stigma surrounding leprosy was employed by haoles to separate Kānaka families from their land and heritage (53). As exile in Moloka‘i is considered a death sentence for its patients, many families chose to remove the existence of lepers from their familial history to avoid being associated with leprosy. Indriyanto et al. suggest the effects of this system might still be felt in Hawai‘i today (120).

Duke’s own words reveal a depth that academic analysis often overlooks: “As Hawaiians began to die out, each generation in Duke’s family was courted by haole, wanting to buy their land. Then ma‘i Pākē lay waste to his family, and, in horror, whites turned away... Mother, father, two sisters” (Davenport 209). Moving to a broader historical perspective, Emily Russell demonstrates how Native Hawaiians suffering from leprosy were dehumanized as “leprous persons at large,” as their mere presence was considered a threat to racial purity (58). Despite the presence of medical facilities and personnel at Kalaupapa, most who were forcibly sent there recall it as a place where people were sent to die. In fact, historical discussions about leprosy show that patients exiled to

Moloka'i were often stripped of their civil rights and treated as though they were already dead. As Ron Amundson and Akira Ruddell-Miyamoto posit,

A person who is separated from his or her ohana must face challenges on their own, with no expectation of support. Such a person was cut off from the rest of Creation, with no link to the land, no link to the gods. Traditional Hawaiians conceived of their own personal identity as situated within their genealogy (their history), their 'ohana (their extended family), and its 'aina (its local geographical home). Without one's 'ohana and 'aina, one was without one's self. (25)

In many ways, Davenport's characters are representatives or even symbols for Hawai'i. Their lives are interwoven with the course of history, influenced and determined by the events. In other words, her characters both represent the 'typical' Hawaiian, and at the same time they are symbolic figures, 'larger than life,' serving as almost mythical explanations of a development that led to the present conditions. They seem to be more means of illustrating an argument, a viewpoint on history, than real people. The fall of Pono's family and Kealoha's leprosy illustrates this fact, yet the eventual inheritance of Kealoha's plantation complicates this representation.

4. Reclaimed 'Āina, Restored Kuleana: The Plantation and Kānaka Maoli Futurity

Hawai'i's isolation policy was finally abolished in 1969. More than 8,000 people died at Kalaupapa during the 103-year period of isolation (Arnold 416). After the stigma surrounding leprosy had ended, Kealoha was finally able to relinquish all his assets to Pono:

She stared blankly while the attorney told her Duke's house, the plantation, three hundred acres of ancestral land, were now in her name. He gathered up the papers and departed. "It all belongs to you," Duke said. "I've given you the land to protect you, insure you..." (Davenport 288)

Pono's own description suggests the early difficulty in managing the plantation: "Those were the years! Planting, pruning, picking, meditating on improvements in the soil. But, you know, the land took hold of us the way it does" (Davenport 514). Even so, Aloha 'Āina remains the defining principle in stewarding the land. Furthermore, the shifts in commodity are significant, as coffee in Kona, Big Island of Hawai'i is different from how the sugar plantation is managed. After the land privatization in 1848, large-scale, organized plantation agriculture and ranching grew rapidly. Coffee production, in particular, thrived in Kona and grew substantially from 1850 through the 1880s. Through rigorous community organizing to develop and preserve the branding of Kona Coffee, local producers have been able to obtain a sale price that is substantially above the industry average since 1994 (Lincoln and Ardoin 565). It is smaller in scale and oriented toward local rather than extractive markets.

However, this economic reclamation is not guaranteed permanently; rather, it must be constantly defended against outside pressures. The social makeup of Hawai'i and Kona has also changed dramatically; Hawai'i has seen a considerable turnover of population over the last several decades, not only whites but also people of Asian descent. When white buyers make covert inquiries, Pono dismisses them as "disgusting dilettantes . . . rich snakes who want to preen and pose as coffee growers" (Davenport 384). This critiques late-stage settler capitalism directly, as further illustrated here:

The foreman has been approached by real estate agents, whose clients, haole, want the farm. Disgusting dilettantes who own grape orchards in California, rich snakes who want to preen and pose as coffee growers in Hawai'i. They do not even wait until I am dead. Local growers, rich competitors like the Sugai family, would love to own my orchards, consolidate them into theirs. But they would never sneak up while my back is turned. Only haole . . . (Davenport 384)

Pono's warning to her descendants carries more than personal anxiety: "Sell your land, you sell your souls, you will damn yourselves to slavery and keep the whites in power" (Davenport 386). Alienating 'āina is not simply an economic transaction. It severs the genealogical connection on which Kānaka selfhood depends. This is why Pono treats territorial

possession as a precondition for freedom, to quote Frantz Fanon (9). Without land, postcolonial sovereignty stays incomplete – at least on the novel's own terms. Pono states the underlying ontology plainly:

The land doesn't belong to us, you see. We belong to the land. So it ever was, even when we lived under a feudal system, long before the haoles came. . . . Hawaiians who are stupid and greedy, sold their honor with their land for easy money, then find whites laugh at them, think of them as low, lazy, without culture. (Davenport 332)

This places Kānaka Maoli within a kinship network that includes land, sea, and sky. Fujikane calls this a genealogical relationship between the lāhui and the earth (“Mapping Abundance on” 23). Davenport has created imaginative fiction which is imprinted with the traumatic history of loss and dispossession (Wiese 57), in which their familial ties towards the land are subjected to the Western instrumentalization of land as commodities.

After Pono dies, her hapa (half-hawaiian) granddaughter, Jess, takes on the responsibility of continuing the family story. “‘What would be more valuable than genealogy,’ she asks, ‘She could do that for them, begin the backward journey. Their heirs would have the wealth of history to aim at life’” (Davenport 476). The telling of their history will be “more beautiful in the remembering” (Davenport, 479). In the last pages of the novel, she speaks the names of her family, beginning with Kelonikoa and continuing with her sisters and cousins, whose lives are “still attached and flowing, in myths, dreams, imaginings. Lives permanent because someone, Jess, was there to pass them on” (Davenport 479). As a contemporary Hawaiian woman, Jess will write their history, thus constructing a post-colonial reality that fuses individual, family, and cultural histories. The resulting postcolonial discourse, exemplified by Davenport, is not a text with a single authority; rather, it is fundamentally dialogic, in the Bakhtinian sense (14). By forcing different historical and cultural voices into conversation with one another, the writer is able to forge a new collective, hybrid, and resistant narrative.

Davenport herself is hapa, descended from Polynesian navigators on her mother's side and a Puritan co-founder of New Haven on her father's side (Ralph 2). Viewed through the lens of this mixed heritage, her narrative choices become clearer. In *Shark Dialogues*, she moves away

from rigid colonial definitions of identity, arguing instead that true belonging is passed down through a chosen, deeply spiritual relationship to *‘āina* rather than a certified bloodline. The plantation stands as the base for imagining Kānaka continuity, not as a return to the pre-colonial past, but as a way to look forward and practice belonging. The granddaughters inherit not just ancestry, but the responsibility to care for the orchard and continue mālama *‘āina* into the future. As Kaylen Ralph concludes,

our history, forced and illegal annexation, imprisonment of our queen, destruction of our kingdom, and mass theft of our native land by the white sugar oligarchy – is a unique story in all the world. . . . Any contemporary Hawaiian writer addresses that tragic history directly or in the subtext of their novels. Native Hawaiians, whether living at home or elsewhere, carry those transgressions in their hearts. (2)

Hawaiian identity and status within the community was (and still is) strongly based on family history. Hence, the underlying structure of Davenport’s novel is a contemporary struggle to establish links to the ancestry, to reclaim one’s genealogy, and thus, one’s history, one’s personal pride, and racial, as well as national identity.

Conclusion

Davenport intentionally avoids giving Pono’s mid-century return to Kona a reassuring or definitive resolution. The plantation remains a contested space, as a site where territorial dispossession, sexual violence, forced exile, and the erasure of family histories intersect, undermining the lineage structures needed for land ownership. The novel does not rely on federal paperwork or state documentation to resolve this alienation. Instead, it insists on a more arduous process: engaging directly with the land, mastering its unique rhythms, and requiring mixed-blood descendants to commit to sustained, daily labor to maintain it. This physical work grounds Kānaka identity in *‘āina* and renders state blood quantum regulations ineffective. By making the plantation a site of ongoing occupation, the novel challenges narratives of simple upward mobility. It prompts a deeper question about the origins of land used by

corporate enterprises and ultimately asserts that true land reclamation is the only meaningful form of justice.

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