"That Which Feeds":

Sovereignties Possibilities of Lāhui (Nation), 'Āina (Land), and 'Ai (Food)

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#### Introduction: We Are Here to Stay

*"When I put a tree into the ground to grow, I'm making a very political statement. I'm saying that we are here to stay."* Uncle Dean says when I ask what being on the land means to him. I think of Ho'okua'āina's acres of lush green farmland, the shoots of red-purple kalo in the lo'i. Less than 15 years ago, the seven acres was an uncultivated, overgrown forest sandwiched between suburbs. Dean's statement is a refusal to leave the 'āina in the face of surrounding uninhabitability; a refusal to accept the displacement of settler colonialism and its roots.

The often-cited Fanon quote notes: "for a colonized people, the most essential value... is first and foremost the land"<sup>1</sup>. As someone who is uprooted from Korean soil by legacies of U.S. militarization and neo-colonization, I find similarities between South Korea and Hawai'i, from prevailing ideologies of capitalism to mass dispossession. As diaspora that has never known this relationship to land, I am interested in what shape understanding of being on the land takes, as well as how the land is key in projects of reclaiming power. I originally asked: how does land shape Kanaka ideas of sovereignty? And what role does food sovereignty—as a necessary project tied to the land—play in the sovereignty of the Hawaiian lāhui (nation)?

I did not realize the extent of situated knowledge that sovereignty involves, nor the interconnectedness involved in its processes. I find a number of tentative conclusions: Hawaiian sovereignty, as with other indigenous sovereignties, is a contested and relational process. While there is an imaginary of sovereignty that cleaves it from Hawaiian culture, making it unappealing to some Kanaka, Hawaiian cultural values of a deep kuleana (duty to) to 'āina create and undergird my collaborators' understandings of a different, ideal sovereignty—ea. Food emerges as one of the multitudes of ways in which this sovereignty is perpetuated, allowing Hawaiian

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 44, quoted in Haunani-Kay Trask, "Settlers of Color and 'Immigrant' Hegemony: 'Locals' in Hawai'i," *Amerasia Journal* 26, no. 2 (2000): 1.

survivance while exposing the failures of colonial food economies; but, as kumu Kahalepuna Richardson-Naki suggests, ea must be actively worked for.

I conclude with the ironies and complexities of the situation: as we sink further and further into crisis, it seems too deep to detangle. If there is one thing that I have learned from our partners, it is that the interconnection of aloha ' $\bar{a}$ ina threatens the alienation<sup>2</sup> characteristic of settler colonialism, and that it offers the principle that must ground any potential answers.

#### Methodology

My research consists of informal and formal interviews with community members, participant observations from personal and class excursions, and discourse analysis of online sources such as Kānaka Maoli Twitter and agricultural project websites. My formal interviewees include Scott Fisher and Denby Freeland from the Hawai'i Island Land Trust, Dean Wilhelm from Ho'okua'āina, and Elena Kong from Nona Lani. Scott, Denby, and Dean were interviewed over Zoom, and Dean was interviewed alongside Alessa Lewis due to time constraints. I held informal conversations with Lorraine, Ekolu Lindsey, and kumu hula Kahalepuna Richardson-Naki. I also use the words of our past collaborators, such as Uncle Bruce from the Pai'aiau Fishpond. My participant observation consists largely of our class sites and some markets in the Upcountry and Kahului area of Maui. I gained access to various social profiles through reference from active organizing groups such as the Oahu Water Protectors (@OahuWP).

I would like to acknowledge the simple fact that there is no monolith of Hawaiian opinion, as with any ethnography. My collaborators come from a wealth of perspectives, but what unites them all is that they are Kanaka who work with the land or on their own land. As

 $<sup>^{2}</sup>$  I generally refer to the postcolonial, Marxist definition of alienation where people are separated from the products of their labor and the right to determine their labor as their own—including the site of the labor.

such, my conclusions are drawn from the somewhat limited cross-section of 'ike kupuna knowledge that I have received—knowledge also shaped by my place as a non-Kanaka guest.

Hawaiian v. Classical Sovereignty and the Limits of "Politicized" Sovereignty

When I ask kumu hula Kahalepuna what she thinks of Hawaiian sovereignty, she turns the question back to me. "What does sovereignty mean to you?"

*I, taken aback, respond with an impromptu answer: "It's when people who have the birthright to their land are able to be on it and do what they want on it."* 

She nods. "So we kind of agree that it would be land that was once yours and then taken away... We didn't even look it up, right?"

"Sovereignty" is a term embroiled in settler-colonial history. Originating from the legal right of British empires to thieve land from Indigenous populations, it remains a topic of debate in critical anthropology. Classical sovereignty describes a top-down process in which a center of power (the nation-state) creates and upholds a political order that allows for the willful taking of life (Foucault's biopower). In the wake of postcolonialism, colonial states struggle to adopt "popular" sovereignties that define power through life and land rather than death via "the protection and communal retaking of the ancestral land from the private control of the settlers".<sup>3</sup>

Classical/colonial sovereignty, largely continued under corporatism and imperialism, erases the connection to 'āina in a direct opposition to Hawaiian culture. After all, "whatever settlers may say... territoriality is settler colonialism's specific, irreducible element".<sup>4</sup> Collaborators assert Hawai'i is a subjugated nation, with over 90% of the eligible Hawaiian

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, "Sovereignty Revisited." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006): 309.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 391.

national population having opposed U.S. citizenship in the 1897 Ku'e Petitions<sup>5</sup>—and that indigenous dispossession continues in ways beyond simple legal claiming of land: "it all began when they began to tax the land," Elena's sister Cherlyn tells me. Thus, invasion continues as "a structure not an event."<sup>6</sup> Trask asserts that the definition of sovereignty is simple: "the ability of a people who share a common culture, religion, language, value system and land base, to exercise control over their lands and lives, independent of other nations"<sup>7</sup>— a control settlers could not allow.

Unlike its counterpart, popular Hawaiian sovereignty<sup>8</sup> does not have the luxury of existing securely within global flows of exploitation, It is constantly shaped and contested by its actors. Yarimar Bonilla notes sovereignty is "a kind of desire that was produced in the postcolonial era"—then who is "shut out of this desire"?<sup>9</sup> What I find is a "politicized" sovereignty that contributes to this "shutting out": some partners note a sovereignty associated with a certain "politicking" that is associated with the inaction of U.S. electoral bureaucracy and/or an inaccessibility within academia. This conception denies visions of sovereignty as an ongoing process of 'āina-based practice and relationality. For example, despite being involved in the continuation of ancestral practices, Scott, Denby, and Ekolu were hesitant to associate themselves with the project of sovereignty. Ekolu especially surprised me, given his fiery

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Dean Itsuji Saranillio. "(Locals Will) Remove All Valuables from Your Vehicle," in *Detours: a decolonial guide to Hawai'i* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 55.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Wolfe, 389.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i.* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 71.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Scholars of indigeneity such as Bonilla and Taiaiake Alfred challenge the term "sovereignty" itself, suggesting it is too-tied to colonial frameworks of dominance over land. While I acknowledge the truth of its history, I use the word because it is what the movement for a Hawaiian nation seems to be most commonly referred to as by my interlocutors. Kauanui suggests that "rather than discarding the term, we need to theorize Indigenous sovereignties and how they distinctly differ from the Western concept of sovereignty," something I hope to do here.

J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, *Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 77. <sup>9</sup> Siobhan McGuirk and Yarimar Bonilla, "AnthroBites: Sovereignty," *Society for Cultural Anthropology*, 2017, <u>https://culanth.org/fieldsights/anthrobites-sovereignty/</u>.

condemnation of tourists and bureaucracy in protecting the Lahaina reef: when I brought up how he felt about Hawaiian sovereignty, he mentioned that he was not expert enough about the subject to speak on the subject at length.

Pragmatism contributes to this withdrawal. As Denby notes, explaining her rationale for her lack of faith in sovereignty: "No one can agree on anything. We can't even get a road fixed." At Pa'aiau Fishpond, Uncle Bruce introduced his own geopolitical concerns of sovereignty and the root causes of the overthrow, describing it as a choice between the subjugation of U.S. empire or of Japanese empire—to some, even Hawaii's *lack* of sovereignty stems its own forced pragmatism and restricts future possibilities.

## Beliefs in Hawaiian 'Āina-Based Sovereignty

But there is a sovereignty that all my collaborators do believe in: one based on a deep aloha 'āina and, where mentioned, acknowledgement of the continued legitimacy of the Hawaiian kingdom. In past class discussions of sovereignty, we have spoken of divides and the difficulties of encapsulating *everyone* in the sovereign project, but what emerges is a largely common agreement on a different kind of sovereignty.

While moving lumber with Kia'i at the Waihe'e Refuge to remove lumber, he tells me: "I want people to acknowledge that we're not the U.S.—we're the Hawaiian nation. But what do I know? I'm just a normal Hawaiian guy." The "normal" part seems to ring true, I think, as I see upside-down<sup>10</sup> Hawaiian flags dotting the highways. There is a reason that Kahalepuna, of all my interviewees, has been most outspoken on Hawaiian sovereignty: as a kumu hula and kupuna, she has been thoroughly involved in the struggle to preserve Hawaiian culture against tourist

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Kahale tells us how the stripes on the Hawaiian flag represent gods, and when hung upside down, the red stripe that represents Ku—the god of war—rises to the top, representing a country at war.

seuxalization and exploitation. In every interview she was mentioned, Queen Liliuokalani was referred to as *our* queen, not *the* queen. "It's not reclaiming our sovereignty," Kia'i says. "We never lost it." Kia'i suggests that this sovereignty, then, is acknowledged as in a process of unearthing, rather than creating.

In this form, too, sovereignty is a process that continues to be forged, rooted in the land and in opposition to state-corporate power over it—rejecting Western concepts of private ownership that started from the Great Māhele. When I ask Lorraine if she can trace her land all the way back, she responds: "I don't have to. I'm just here temporarily." The "big guy" up there owns the land, she says. Casumbal-Salazar notes how "the land… is fundamental to [Kanaka 'Oiwi] indigeneity. [The mountains are]... are our kin. As our kupuna are buried in the soil, our ancestors become the land that grows our food and the dust that we breathe"<sup>11</sup> The respect and encyclopedic knowledge of the land that my interviewers demonstrate is a natural extension of Hawaiian genealogy. Elena notes that she is a descendant of Naiowi, a warrior who trained King Kamehameha, and says that that is how she knows "we have a responsibility in itself to hold onto our land." I ask Scott the same question, who then repeats the words of his Oceanic cousins in Papua New Guinea: "Your land is like the skin on your body. It's what defines you. It's what holds you." It is a relational mindset that is incommensurable to Western sovereignties.

I turn to "ea," the Hawaiian concept often translated as "sovereignty," "life," and/or "breath." Ea, unlike settler colonial philosophies of land, "is based on the experiences of people on the land, relationships forged through the process of remembering and caring for wahi pana, storied places."<sup>12</sup> Uncle Dean expands on the concept, mentioning that it is a mode of Hawaiian

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Iokepa Casumbal-Salazar, "A Fictive Kinship: Making 'Modernity,' 'Ancient Hawaiians,' and the Telescopes on Mauna Kea," *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 4, no. 2 (2017): 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Kim Compoc, "Weaving Our Sovereignties Together: Maximizing *Ea* for Filipinx and Hawaiians," *Amerasia Journal* 45, no. 3 (2020): 328.

adaptability and resilience. Ea's same belief in place-based care, adaptability, and cooperative survival seems to tether the aforementioned 'āina-based sovereignty, even if it is not mentioned in relation: it is an informed sovereignty that, by definition, opposes processes of empire, colonization, and alienation. Kahalepuna was the only one to mention it without question and equivocates the two. "We are the servants of the land for the longevity of the lāhui," she says, adding "for the lāhui" onto a common 'olelo no'eau (proverb).

### **Sovereign Futurities and Their Food Projects**

How does ea/sovereignty move into actual reality? Common beliefs of ea does not erase remaining pragmatism, which cultivates a multiplicity of plans, modes, and definitions of/for Hawaiian sovereignty. As Kia'i, and many other Kanaka such as Trask and Kahale focus on the ideological and legal practicalities of sovereignty, ranging from long-awaited federal recognition to environmental pedagogy, other call for "slower," methodologies: Scott offers a "sovereignty from the bottom up" via a retrieval, critique, and transformation of cultural practices. He verbalizes what seems to be present in all other Kanaka ideas: that only when cultural practices of land, community, and 'ike kupuna (knowledge of the elders) are centered would Hawaiian sovereignty advance Hawaiian life.<sup>13</sup>

One integral way that Hawaiians move toward ea and de-alienation from the land is through the food. 'Āina, when broken down, means food ('ai) and an action denoter (na), forming "that which feeds." Food is reciprocity: that which the land gives, so we may live. What has then come with alienation from the land, then, is an alienation from food itself. Uncle Dean

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> In linking these diverse perspectives, I am reminded of Aliah from the Malama Learning Center, who finished her recounting of the myth of Pele with: "that's how our family's version goes; everyone has a different one, but that doesn't mean any of them are wrong."

and Scott<sup>14</sup> both immediately bring up the fact that 90% of Hawaiians' calories are from imported foods, and that this is a pattern that needs to change. Dean mentions the precarity of so many foods being imported in reference to current geopolitical tensions; the globalization of foods is not only an inefficient process but endangers people when these precarious connections break down. Scott additionally mentions local relationships to 'āina: when consumptive items are fundamental to livelihood, it becomes difficult to switch to systems of cultivation.

Scott says "food sovereignty is key to sovereignty." Other ecologists such as Clare Gupta note how aloha 'āina centers "food sovereignty" by "radically restructuring the streams of power that control and distribute resources."<sup>15</sup> While this may be true,<sup>16</sup> food sovereignty is difficult to achieve amid economies of consumption. Dean notes that he is far from self-sufficient unless he wants to eat a monotonous diet of kalo, although his goal is to spend six months eating only from his land. He extends his project of food relationality, inviting Kanaka youth to come work in the lo'i, where he hopes that connecting with the process of food as a part of the land can impart a mindset of the world based on subsistence and care—an often-suppressed optimism. As I walk down the stalls of farms in the Upcountry and Kahului markets, I notice farms upon local farms selling produce and cannot help but wonder how these farms are implicated in local economies, and what moves, if at all, they make toward food sovereignty. Lopes Farm, for example, asserts its waste-reducing, sustainable methodologies in meat cultivation, asserting: "Join us in creating a food sovereign Maui!", but as Scott notes, farms are on tight profit margins simply to survive.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Scott runs a large 'ulu (breadfruit) farm as his other job, hoping to sell to locals.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Clare Gupta, "Return to Freedom: Anti-GMO Aloha 'Āina Activism on Molokai as an Expression of Place-based Food Sovereignty," *Globalizations* 12, no. 4 (2015): 530.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> If a bit reductive of how aloha 'āina is just as much about the relations that undergird food sovereignty.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> "About," Lopes Farm, accessed March 12, 2022, <u>https://www.lopesfarmmaui.com/about</u>.

Gupta further points out how "food sovereignty is a multivalent term that is used and deployed by different people for different purposes," referring to Hawaiians organizing against GMO corporations without an understanding of how they historically exploited native land.<sup>18</sup> What this further suggests is the building of sovereignty as a political, educational project: political sovereignty demands food sovereignty, but food sovereignty does not necessarily denote full understanding of ea—even as it destabilizes the forces that keep ea from becoming.

#### Ea is Worked For

Kahale notes that while so many people know about sovereignty, not as many people are willing to understand what it actually means; there is a difference between ea as an easily supportable concept, and ea as a project that is forged. Actions that happen to support reclamations of the lāhui, such as food sovereignty, are not in themselves moves toward the lāhui, but hold great potentialities of detachment from colonialisms' livelihoods.

Casumbal-Salazar writes "A shared characteristic in each of these translations is that ea is an active state of being. Like breathing, ea cannot be achieved or possessed; it requires constant action day after day, generation after generation."<sup>19</sup> This labor is precisely what complicates ea; as people grow separate from their labor, processes that depend on labor seem undesirable and arduous. For example, Lorraine explains how she grows bananas instead of kalo on her property because the latter is "too much work," knowing tourist economies are enough to sustain her. While some Hawaiians return to labor on the land from this faith and do not, there is a heavy consideration of material realities in both cases.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Gupta, 540.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Casumbal Salazar, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Such as Ku'ulei Perreira-Keawekane, who runs her own farm, mutual aid, and Hawaiian cultural sessions. Ku'ulei Perreira-Keawekane (@mauli.ola). Instagram, accessed March 12, 2022,

Others also condemn the actors against whom ea seeks to be reclaimed. What stands in direct opposition to the connectivity of aloha 'āina is a narcissistic disregard for indigenous knowledge and a perspective of land as an exploitable resource-one that stems from the desire for capital and global power.<sup>21</sup> The U.S. military, tourist industries, and the U.S. government function are some of the larger settler colonial forces that occupy Hawai'i. As Kanaka activists Keoni DiFranco<sup>22</sup> and Kue Kawena note,<sup>23</sup> the U.S. military is the perpetrator of mass pollution at Red Hill as well as mountains around the world. Dwayne at Kipuka Olowalu tells us, angrily, how the military has no disregard for the health of the land and community. Furthermore, amid drought, Hawaiians on Twitter and the locals I run into express outrage at the hypocrisy of how residents must reduce 10% of their water use while resorts remain untouched.<sup>24</sup> Even some largescale agricultural projects at claim to restore Hawaiian sustainability, such as Mahi Pono,<sup>25</sup> are corporatized and divert massive amounts of important water for Hawaiians to little benefit for the people.<sup>26</sup> In the face of broader systems of oppression and some of the most well-funded, wellresourced groups of land destruction, ea cannot naturally grow—especially when it must confront with the physical and mental systems of exploitation. Hence, moves toward sovereignty

<sup>21</sup> And while no one disagrees that greediness is the problem, some, such as Scott and Dean are hesitant to label capitalism the problem due to its perceived benefits, or their own lack of knowledge on the matter.
<sup>22</sup> Keoni DiFranco (@Keoni\_DiFranco), "The US Military is the #1 polluter in Hawai'i / We are safer with Red Hill decommissioned / We are safer with Makua returned / We are safer with Pohakuloa gone / The US Military's presence is a threat to Kanaka life & well being / Deoccupy & return our 'aina". Twitter, March 8, 2022, <a href="https://twitter.com/Keoni\_DiFranco/status/1501351693212073987?s=20&t=0FxajBRBWhgCntIRp4duNw">https://twitter.com/Keoni\_DiFranco/status/1501351693212073987?s=20&t=0FxajBRBWhgCntIRp4duNw</a>.

<sup>23</sup> Kue Kawena (@Kue\_Kawena). "Don't forget who did this to us. Don't forget who poisoned our water. When you go to fill up your cup, when you have to be careful to not leave the water running too long to avoid waste, remember that the US military did this to us and we still have to hold them accountable". Twitter, March 9, 2022, https://twitter.com/Kue\_Kawena/status/1501759185578389506?s=20&t=0FxajBRBWhgCntIRp4duNw

<sup>24</sup> @seadarw. "We should have some of the cleanest water in the world but because of imperialism we're put in this life threatening position. We are nothing without wai". Twitter, March 9, 2022, https://twitter.com/seadarw/status/1501759873922453506

https://www.instagram.com/mauli.ola/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Mahi Pono, *MahiPono*, last modified 2022, <u>https://mahipono.com/</u>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Isaac Moriwake and Hokuao Pellegrino. "Hawai'i Water Commission Issues Historic Decision on Maui's "Four Great Waters," *Earthjustice* (2022): <u>https://earthjustice.org/news/press/2021/hawaii-water-commission-issues-historic-decision-on-mauis-four-great-waters</u>.

require organization, as shown by victorious mass movements such as Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana or anti-Red Hill movements.<sup>27</sup>

### **Conclusion:** Principle

Nothing presupposes decolonial sovereignty, but decolonial sovereignty, it seems, presupposes everything. This is a difficult answer to stand with; but if there is one thing that I have learned from our partners, it is that ea and aloha 'aina threaten alienation, and that similar sorts of interconnection are required for any sort of endured, future survival.

My partners show the importance of interconnection: of knowing the land, of histories, of genealogy—and that these are the only things that can bring about resistance to the causes that threaten what be. Food sovereignty, for example, is one such method. But interconnection is arduous, hidden, and forged just like the journey for sovereignty itself; and ea is forged, worked for, and intersects with broader regimes of politics, manifested in ways from Ho'okua'āina's educational projects on the lo'i, to HILT's getting easements for historic farms, to legal claims to the lahui. I have learned from our collaborators how difficult the work is, and how everything they do is informed by ancestries upon ancestries, and while it is sometimes discouraging (even by their own words), we think of how many hands made lighter work of the forest.

I borrow a different ethnography from Compoc, and how Aunty Terri, a Kanaka demilitarization activist, was informed by struggles everywhere from Palestine to Black movements in the U.S.<sup>28</sup> I tell Kahalepuna that "I see us—Koreans and Hawaiians—as cousins.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Workers World Party (@workersworld), "Ongoing vigilance and boundless solidarity with the O'ahu Water Protectors. The struggle to #ShutDownRedHill has won a major victory against imperialism and white supremacy". Twitter, March 8, 2022,

https://twitter.com/workersworld/status/1501403926817554433?s=20&t=F1MAL8ps2HaPuB\_zKsUzKA<sup>28</sup> Compoc, 323.

Allies." "We see you as the same," she responds. As I hug Uncle Bruce before we leave, he whispers in my ear to "take care of my country." It is a refusal of alienation, a welcoming of connection—from the land to the people—that makes Hawaiian sovereignty so large, so unfitting within the global schema. As we revive place-based ways of being and survival, we take away the lessons of the kupuna to make sure our moves toward collective life are principled.

*Ua ma uke ea o ka 'āina I ka pono!* The life of the land is preserved in righteousness!

Mahalo nui to our partners.

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