



Our Hawai'i-Grown Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation: Recommitting to Mother Earth

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The University of Hawai'i at Mānoa envisions a Hawai'i in which each individual, family, and community—irrespective of race—can recognize their collective and interdependent kuleana¹ to properly care for 'āina.²

WHEN THE TRUTH, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) project invited university campuses to envision what our communities will look like when racism is jettisoned, our University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM) team took that seriously. It was a powerful and important invitation. The challenge we quickly found, though, was that when we closed our eyes and tried to imagine that future, not a single one of us could see it. Not a single person on our team, no matter our racial or ethnic background, could recall a memory of when racism did not exist in our own lives, our parents' lives, or our grandparents' lives. But then we remembered that we are embraced in the bosom of Hawai'i: an island home that still carries both memory³ and practice⁴ of being in relationship with each other and the natural environment in a way governed by a completely different mindset, worldview, and language far away from the construct of race. That was the beginning of our hope and pathway forward.

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Our Vision

As our team sat around a conference table, we contemplated the words “He ali'i ka 'āina, he kauwā ke kanaka” (Pukui 1983), written in Hawaiian language. We had determined that this proverb would seed our work as a TRHT Campus Center. Commonly translated as “The land is the chief, humans are the servants,” the translation does not fully explain the socioecological kinship that it invokes. Nonetheless, we knew the proverb could guide our vision.

We utilize the TRHT framework below to elaborate on our vision.

Truths

Like anywhere else in the world, multiple truths shape our current reality in Hawai'i. There are truths of abundance, intelligence, and hope. There are also truths of fear, separation, and greed. Meanwhile, we in Hawai'i are already experiencing the impacts of climate change and global warming. Thus, the elements of our natural environments—ancestors to the Native Hawaiian people—are calling out to all of us to abandon structures and practices built from racism and other forms of oppression and collectively work toward aloha 'āina.⁵

Hawai'i: Past and Present

Less than two hundred years ago, Native Hawaiians had a cultural, political, religious, and organizational way of living in balance and harmony with their environment (Kame'eleihiwa 1992). The land, water, oceans, and all the natural elements were sacred to the Native Hawaiian people; thus they treated them with the utmost care. This allowed for a society that worked in reciprocity with the environment and cared for the natural resources of Hawai'i in a manner that allowed the environment to reciprocate by providing all the nourishment and protection needed. During this time of abundance, Hawai'i and Native Hawaiians produced or had the potential to



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produce one million metric tons of food annually, levels comparable to food consumption in Hawai‘i today (Kimura and Suryanata 2016; Winter 2019). To be clear, Hawai‘i is one of the most isolated places on the earth, and Native Hawaiians relied solely on the resources within Hawai‘i to feed their people and did so while maintaining a healthy ecosystem.

Fast forward to 2020: More than 90 percent of food in Hawai‘i is imported (Kimura and Suryanata 2016; Winter 2019). We are experiencing sea-level rise, catastrophic storms, landslides, rain bombs, and other environmental catastrophes due to climate change. One of our islands on the northwest end of our archipelago recently vanished under the ocean.⁶

Hawai‘i, the “Isms,” and Sustainability

Why the drastic change in our ability to feed ourselves as a community and in our ability to care for our island home? Our UHM TRHT Campus Center focuses on this question. Our work posits that many of the causes are rooted in racism and settler colonialism,⁷ related structures—both imported to Hawai‘i (Kauai 2014; Beamer 2014)—that have resulted in systematic efforts to eliminate and erase Native Hawaiian culture, language, worldviews, and connection to our mother earth, things that all of us who call Hawai‘i home need to understand.

Staff from AAC&U and Estrategia Group visit the TRHT Campus Center at University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa.

Settler Colonialism

Settler colonialism refers to dynamics involved in systematic efforts to assimilate, isolate, or suppress indigenous people—their societies, culture, language, or political systems—via what Wolfe (2006) terms “logics of elimination.” These dynamics, and resistance to them, have been visible in Hawai‘i since the late 1700s, when European arrivals and early settlement prompted the near collapse of the indigenous Native Hawaiian population due to disease (Stannard 1989). Settler colonialism has also been tied to the devaluation of non-Western and nonwhite people and their ways (Kauanui 2008; Moreton-Robinson 2015; Rohrer 2016). In Hawai‘i, as elsewhere, this has involved the suppression and outlawing of Native Hawaiian language and cultural practices (Silva 2004; Trask 2008). Further, the taking of land and its commodification over the last two hundred years in Hawai‘i has catalyzed widespread alienation of people from the land, and especially Native Hawaiian people from their homeland (Kame‘eleihiwa 1992; Silva 2004; Van Dyke 2008). This forms the context of our work: an awareness of how racism

and settler colonialism shape human engagement with one another and also with mother earth.

Below we share a narrative of one of our coauthors, Matthew Kamakani Lynch, as he explores some of the ways he has been shaped by settler colonialism.

Matt's Narrative: A Fourth-Generation Immigrant in Hawai'i

On my mom's side, I'm a fourth-generation descendant of plantation workers who migrated to Hawai'i from the Philippines in search of a better life. "Las islas Felipinas" was the name imposed upon the islands by the Spanish explorer Ruy López de Villalobos in 1543 to honor Prince Philip II of Spain. Filipinos have endured multiple waves of colonization, occupation, and exploitation by China, Portugal, Spain, and the United States, which has largely severed the original peoples of these islands from their indigenous ancestral knowledge systems.

On my dad's side, I am descended from Irishmen and Scotsmen who were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands by the occupying forces of the British Empire (for committing some petty crime in their struggle to subsist) and shipped to Australia as convicts. They served in the labor camps of the British colonies established on the indigenous lands of the Aboriginal people of the Australian continent, heirs to more than forty thousand years of the indigenous ancestral knowledge systems of that place.

Matt situates himself at the intersection of racism and settler colonialism. Accurately naming and identifying generational legacies of racism and settler colonialism give him agency to reimagine his relationships with land and others. We believe this truth telling is an important first step toward healing, and we encourage this practice for everyone with whom we work. To further this healing and transformation process, we turn to Native Hawaiian concepts to help us reimagine who we are and who we want to be.

Healing

Race and racism seek to disconnect us from ourselves, each other, and our mother earth. In recognizing this, we realized that we needed alternative constructs that invite us to reconnect. For these reasons, we turn to Native Hawaiian constructs including, but not limited to, mo'okū'auhau and kuleana.

Construct #1: Mo'okū'auhau

In English, we often use the term "genealogy" to describe mo'okū'auhau (Pukui and Elbert 1986). While it is a way that Native Hawaiians track lineage and family trees

(Kame'eleihiwa 1992; Kanahele 2011), mo'okū'auhau is also the "philosophical construct" (Brown 2016, 27) that allows us to track and map relationality between all parts of our world. Mo'okū'auhau is a lens in which connections are constantly sought out and foregrounded. In our TRHT work, we recognize this invitation into connectivity as a gift that Hawai'i offers to all of us, no matter who we are. Therefore, if defining ourselves and others based on race has divided and disconnected us, utilizing mo'okū'auhau is a pathway to healing by reconnecting.

Construct #2: Kuleana

From a Native Hawaiian point of view, when you know your connections to another, the kuleana emerges. Because Native Hawaiians understand their relationship to their environment as a familial one, the most important kuleana, as described in our guiding proverb, is to care for our island home (Kame'eleihiwa 1992). One of our coauthors, Makana Reilly, shares a story below that highlights this relationship and commitment to place.

Makana's Narrative: Her Kuleana as a Native Hawaiian Woman

There are specific practices that have helped me embody these familial connections to our environment—for example, the piko, or umbilical cord. When we are babies and our piko falls off, our parents put it somewhere in our natural environment to physically tie us to that place. When we have children, we also bury the 'iewe (placenta). This intentional and physical connection keeps us constantly accountable to and responsible for that place forever. This care, started and maintained for one hundred generations in Hawai'i by people who never knew me but planned for me, has manifested in the environments and knowledge systems that nourish me today. Therefore, I am now constantly thinking: How do I prepare this place and practice for five, ten, and more generations after me whom I'll never meet?

In our TRHT work, we help to create opportunities and experiences for folks to explore their own genealogies and relationships with the environments and people of Hawai'i to ultimately come upon both their unique and collective kuleana to help take care of Hawai'i. We find that this work is extremely healing and re-empowering because it allows participants to bring their whole selves and to find their agency within a community.

Based on the value sets above, Matt, who previously shared some of his disconnects, explains how he utilizes mo'okū'auhau and kuleana for his own healing and transformation.

Matt's Narrative: Healing and Reimagining

Today, through the relationship I cultivate with Hawai'i—the place that has nourished and shaped me most—I am able to begin healing from the intergenerational traumas that I carry from forced separations. I do this by committing to be in active relationship with the islands, its people, and the knowledge systems that teach us how to care for our island home.

Matt's narrative is particularly important because this healing work is not only for Native Hawaiians; it is for everyone who calls Hawai'i home, because we believe that each person who lives in Hawai'i—and reaps the benefits from living there—has a kuleana to help care for her.

Transformation: Remembering Our Past for Our Future

Race does not perpetuate the kinds of relationships and connections that both Makana, a Native Hawaiian woman, and Matt, a fourth-generation Filipino immigrant, refer to. The master narrative of race (and the associated construct of settler colonialism) divides and separates us from our relationships between people and land, hence the climate crisis we are experiencing today. Our TRHT Campus Center believes that, by utilizing Native Hawaiian constructs that invite reconnections and commitment to caring for those we are in relationship with, we might just give our children a fighting chance. ●

NOTES

1. *Kuleana*: The dear privileges, rights, and responsibilities we carry to uphold the well-being of another entity.
2. *Āina*: In short, *āina* refers to land. But in a longer version, *āina* refers to anything that feeds and nourishes us physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.
3. When we mention memory, we are specifically referring to the archival memory of the hundreds of thousands of pages of typescript of Hawaiian language newspapers from the mid-nineteenth century through the early twentieth century that became a repository of knowledge, opinion, and history about Hawai'i. For more information, visit <https://awaiaulu.org/insights/ike-ku'oko'a>.
4. When we mention practice, we are referring to the many Native Hawaiian (NH) cultural practices that have survived and that teach us how to be in relationship with each other and our environment in vastly different ways. Such NH practices include but are not limited to hula, canoe voyaging, farming, fishing, and weaving.
5. *Aloha āina*: To be in relationship of love, caring, and sustainable reciprocity with the land and other natural resources. This language comes from our original vision document created by members of our original TRHT advisory board. Major contributors to this vision included Nalani Minton, Nalani Balutski, Mehana Vaughan, Rosie Alegado, Matthew Kamakani Lynch, Charmaine Mangram, and Kaiwipunikauikawēkiu Lipe.
6. For more information on this event, visit <https://www.sciencealert.com/entire-hawaiian-island-was-just-erased-by-hurricane-east-walaka-chip-fletcher-monk-seals-green-sea-turtles>.

7. We use the term “settler colonialism,” explained below, throughout this document. While we use the term, we do not mean to suggest that Hawai'i was ever a colony in any legal way. Instead, we fully recognize that Hawai'i is illegally occupied by America. For more information on this occupation, visit <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-107/pdf/STATUTE-107-Pg1510.pdf>. To be clear, we use the term settler colonialism to describe the type of ongoing project and mindset utilized in Hawai'i by many who have made Hawai'i their home.

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