A Nation Rising: A review

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Introduction

From the time I was a small child in Hawai‘i, I often sat for hours listening to my grandparents and other kupuna “talk story” about their lives, shared experiences, our history. This small group of men and women in their late 80s were an endless source of information that I could never have learned in over twenty years of formal education. In much the same way, A Nation Rising reads like the secret stories you hear when elders reminisce, inviting you in to a world of truth that has been kept hidden for decades. Through its collection of diverse voices narrating the struggles and successes of the Hawaiian Sovereignty movement, the anthology works to make visible a people and a struggle that has fought systematic erasure for over a century. Although the Hawaiian Sovereignty movement came of age alongside other well-known political movements – the Black Panthers and the American Indian Movement, for example – our struggle has received little attention outside of Hawai‘i. A Nation Rising puts the Hawaiian sovereignty movement into conversation with global struggles for self-determination and reveals the depths and complexity of Kanaka resistance as an exemplar for similar struggles worldwide. Not since Haunani-Kay Trask’s revolutionary book, From a Native Daughter, has the voice of the
Hawaiian people spoken so loudly, demanding to be heard and insisting on taking its rightful place in the canon of global history.

Editor Noelani Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua’s introduction to the anthology sets the historical stage for the mo‘olelo (stories, narratives) that follow, weaving together the history, complexities, and triumphs of each movement as well as their historical and spiritual interconnectedness, while outlining the overarching goals of the text as two-fold. Primarily, the editors aim to provide readers with a multiplicity of voices and strategies within the Hawaiian sovereignty movement, and to make visible the Hawaiian culture and people as an active and contemporary reality. Thoroughly written histories of Hawai‘i in general are scarce and often flawed (historian Gavin Daws’ Shoals of Time (1974) comes first to mind here), leaving out all trace of Kanaka Maoli resistance and most traces of our existence following the illegal US occupation. This written disremembering of our history is due to both the intentions and the repercussions of colonial capitalist occupation. Intentionally, haole writers of Hawaiian history have worked to further the capitalist and ideological investments in romanticizing the islands as a once-heathen land in need of saving, transformed into a now serene land full of happy, welcoming natives. Such a writing of history both lures in curious tourists (and their money) while simultaneously justifying, in the name of progress, the ongoing violence enacted on the Hawaiian people. As a repercussion of the ideological arm of US occupation, much of Hawaiian history has been disremembered due to a lack of historians fluent in the Hawaiian language and able to access Hawaiian language primary sources (a critique made by many Hawaiian Studies scholars including Noenoe Silva, Noelani Arista, and ku‘ualoha ho‘omanawanui). A Nation Rising fills that gap by emphasizing Kanaka Maoli authorship (as creators and literal writers) of our own history.

As its second overarching goal, the theoretical aim of the book is to set forth and explore the Hawaiian concept of ea as a political philosophy and as the driving force behind the various tactics within the larger movement. Ea is thus offered as a more contextually appropriate alternative to the western concept of sovereignty. For readers unfamiliar with ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i (the Hawaiian language), this complex understanding of a two-letter word may require a leap of faith and an ongoing sense of confusion or frustration – just when you think you understand ea, you discover it holds another facet, a more nuanced meaning for which the English language can offer you no easy translation. Ea, with each invocation, is defined by multiple simultaneous meanings, specifically sovereignty, life, and breath of the land and the people: “Ea is like the tool that allows us to navigate and guide ourselves – the large steering paddle of a canoe or the rudder of a boat” (p. 5). Ea, like aloha, can neither be simply translated nor understood, yet it is the force that gave birth to and sustains the Hawaiian sovereignty movement. As such, the editors set up the concept of ea as one that is both compulsory and chosen, innate and yet always reborn, and which therefore is inseparable from our daily actions, personal or political, large or small. The chapters that follow further illustrate ea in its many embodiments, demonstrating that ea is not merely a word or a concept, but a decolonial methodology which allows Kanaka Maoli to bring (and write) ourselves into existence on our own terms and in contrast to the existence presented by colonizers and occupiers for centuries before.
This groundbreaking new anthology is divided into three parts – *Part I: Life, Part II: Land*, and *Part III: Sovereignty* – each bookended by short biographical “portraits” of community activists and leaders. Combined with actual photographic portraits – beautiful black and white photographs by Ed Greevy – these short pieces put a contemporary human face to the movement, which otherwise might remain an abstract and incomprehensible struggle of a people who existed in a distant past. The sixteen essays cover a wide range of perspectives and issues within the Hawaiian sovereignty movement. From land rights, to water rights, to the global issue of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), each author’s unique voice and experience mirrors the diversity of the Hawaiian people at home and in diaspora. Together, the essays reveal a movement as a way of life with no identifiable beginning nor end, a movement as embodiment and enactment of a long-held, spiritually-rooted commitment to the life, breath, and sovereignty of the Hawaiian land and its people. Ea.

Although the editors have organized the sixteen chapters and six portraits into sections on life, land, and sovereignty, halfway through the book I realized that the ideas of life, land, and sovereignty intersect and overlap in ways that make them truly inseparable from one another. It's hard to say that any one essay is about life more than it is about land, or vice versa. I loved that, actually -- that realization. In its own way, the organization of the book brilliantly supports the concept of ea and its multiplicity of overlapping meanings. Continuing in that vein, I present my review in three parts, allowing for the various mo'olelo to speak to multiple aspects of ea as they spoke to me while I read them.

**Ke ea o na Kanaka ‘Oiwi: The life of the Native Hawaiian people**

Ea is life, and life is the ‘āina: the lands, the waters, and our reciprocal relationship to both. Life is hula, ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i (the Hawaiian language), unrestricted water flow toward taro patches and fish ponds, and access to traditional Hawaiian spirituality and cultural practices. At its most simple, life is simply surviving day to day and having a home in which to safely do so. Yet in our native land, Kanaka Maoli represent roughly one-third of the homeless population despite comprising only one tenth of the total population.¹ Business owners and politicians work ceaselessly to obfuscate this reality, as the livelihood of the Hawaiian people threatens and is threatened by the livelihood of capitalist interests. Tourists are now protected from the visual assault of the burgeoning homeless population in Hawai‘i thanks to the latest “sit-lie” bans - a thirty day sentence and up to $1000 fine for anyone sitting or lying on sidewalks in popular tourist and business districts throughout Honolulu. While the state invests time and money in

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¹ Yuan S and Vo H. (2014). *Homeless Service Utilization Report: Statistical Supplement, Hawai‘i FY 2013*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Center on the Family. While these are the numbers given by the state based on their definitions of homeless and their respondents’ self-identification as Hawaiian; Anne Keala Kelly claims that 20 percent of the total population is Hawaiian and “about 70 percent of homeless in Hawai‘i are Hawaiian."
making homelessness less visible, no effort thus far has resulted in making it any less a reality for Hawai‘i’s Indigenous population.

_A Nation Rising_ opens with a portrait of two “houseless” Hawaiians: Marie Beltran and Annie Pau. Author and journalist Anne Keala Kelly argues that these women and all other Hawaiians living on the land (beaches, parks, etc.) are perhaps the truest (albeit “unwitting”) warriors of the sovereignty movement. In comparison, Kelly calls out the “Hawaiian middle class” as armchair activists doing little more than marching down the street when convenient, later returning to their privileged posts in government, academia, and society. Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua sums it up aptly, stating, “For Kelly, the master’s tools can never fully dismantle the master’s house” (p. 21). Likewise, despite ongoing efforts at total occupation, the master’s houses can never fully displace Hawaiians’ from our rightful home. By refusing to leave their ancestral homes and insisting on their native rights to the land, beach-dwelling Kanaka are enacting and embodying _āina in its truest form. Through this lens, Kelly complicates our understanding of houselessness for Kanaka ‘Ōiwi, arguing that this type of daily resistance is equally the result of poverty as it is an expression of the “politics of Hawaiian culture” (p. 37), demonstrating personal self-determination without taking from or answering to the occupying state. Kelly further argues for Beltran’s and Pau’s houselessness and its resulting arrests and legal proceedings as evidence of Kanaka resistance in a material form, specifically taking from the state its most prized possession: money in the form of the costs of evictions and court proceedings.

While Kelly’s portrait offers a more nuanced understanding of Hawaiians who are “homeless at home,” she does not overlook the very real material and ideological roots of Hawaiian homelessness. Both Beltran and Pau were pushed out of the O‘ahu rental market by the massive expansion of the military and the resulting increase in state subsidized military housing, coupled with a continual surge in occupation by wealthy American transplants and tourists. Although Kelly celebrates the determination of both women to “live as Hawaiians in Hawai‘i,” she makes clear that both situations are evidence of the ongoing displacement of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi in the face of the occupiers’ obscene material excess. The struggle for Kanaka livelihood as related to land rights finds its roots in the Great Mahele of 1848, the act that first allowed private ownership of land. Passage of this act paved the way for the systematic displacement of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi, creating a land in which the Kanaka belong to the land, but the land belongs to the occupiers.

**Ke ea o ka ʻāina: The life of the land**

As the life of the people depends on our rights to live on the land, so too does the life of the land depend on mālama ʻāina: our caring for the land that sustains us. Mālama ʻāina has remained a core value of the Kanaka ‘Ōiwi, and it serves as a connective thread woven through each chapter in this collection. A significant portion of the anthology is dedicated to connecting the struggles
to protect Hawaiian lands and waters to the protection of Kanaka relationships to the ‘āina, from the right to access water for traditional farming and fishing to the right to access “state owned” lands for ceremonial and spiritual traditions. Protecting the life of the land and the water, often through legal battles against the occupying government and business interests, is yet another example of the Kanaka enactment of ea as a political strategy. As one facet of mālama ‘āina, the fight for water access has been a seminal and ongoing battle since the era of the “Big Five” sugar companies (beginning in the early 19th century) to the present day diversion of water toward golf courses and high end tourist resorts. Chapters 9 and 10 highlight just two of the many attempts at working within the settler legal system to protect the people’s access to water as expressions of ea. D. Kaupu’ala Sproat (chapter 9) and Pauahi Ho’okano (chapter 10) highlight the possibilities and drawbacks of seeking justice through the occupying state’s legal system, and the ways in which the Hawaiian people kū’e (resist) by taking it upon themselves to enforce legal wins that the state awards but does not enact (for example, individual taro farmers releasing diverted waters back into their streams rather than waiting for the state to comply with Water Commission mandates).

Sproat’s chapter, “A Question of Wai,” addresses the decades long battle over wai (fresh water) as a public right versus a private commodity. As the most isolated island nation on the globe, Hawai’i has historically depended upon fresh water as life, and the Kanaka ‘Ōiwi have respected and deified fresh water as sacred (p. 202). In contrast, with the expansion of sugar plantations and the massive amounts of water required to produce just one pound of sugar, Hawai’i’s water, like its land and its people, fell victim to dispossession in the name of capitalist progress. Sproat details the history of water diversion across the Hawaiian archipelago, transforming the native ways of water use (beginning from the mountains, down the streams, flooding taro patches and feeding fish ponds, watering the land, and then returning to the sea) to an unnatural construction of ditches that diverted upwards of 30 million gallons of water per day from the rainy Koʻolau Mountains clear across the island of Oahu to sugar plantations in the drier central and leeward plains. Similar strategies were enacted on the other major islands. Soon, the legal battle for ownership of fresh water took place between competing sugar barons, resulting in an unintentional win for the people of Hawaiʻi. As the result of McBryde Sugar Company v. Robinson (1973), a battle over which sugar baron owned the rights to water from the Hanapēpē River on Kauaʻi, the Hawaiʻi Supreme Court ruled that neither company has ownership interest in this or any fresh water, as the water belongs to the people “for their common good” (p. 204). Over the course of the following decade, similar cases followed, with continued reinforcement of the responsibility of the state to preserve and protect the fresh water of Hawaiʻi for its people, and the enactment of Hawaiʻi’s Water Code which, among other provisions, mandated that along with the protection of the water, any related “subsistence, cultural and religious” (p. 205) uses of the water by the Kanaka ‘Ōiwi were protected by law. In was not until 1994, however, following the closure of Oahu Sugar Plantation, that water was restored to the Koʻolau streams and the communities, allowing for the rebirth of taro farming and fresh water fishing as a means for both cultural and literal survival. Still, the McBryde decision
was a landmark case, paving the way for future water rights cases like the nationally celebrated *Waiāhole* decision in 2000 which put in place a public trust doctrine protecting the fresh water of Hawai‘i for “environmental protection, Maoli rights and practices, appurtenant rights, and domestic water uses, all of which have presumptive priority over private commercial diversions” (p. 207).

Although *Waiāhole* and similar cases (*Nā Wai ‘Ehā* on Maui) did not result in complete restoration of water flow, and “politics as usual” has resulted in revisions to Kanaka wins in court due to the demands of political pressure, Sproat applauds these small victories as enactment of ea and a successful use of the master’s tools to, if not dismantle the master’s house, at least to chip away at the foundation, make cracks in the windows, and dramatically lower the value of the master’s investment in water as property. These landmark cases will prove to be instrumental in contemporary water rights struggles against the plague-like spread of golf courses and luxury resorts across the islands, each siphoning off millions of water per day. As climate change makes water rights a global fight, perhaps other governments and community organizations will look to Hawai‘i’s example as well and recognize our collective kuleana (responsibility) for protecting fresh waters for the survival of our planet and its people.

**Ke ea o Hawai‘i: The sovereignty of the Hawaiian nation**

“*Ua mau ke ea o ka ‘āina i ka pono,*” now the official motto of the settler state, were the words first uttered by Kamehameha III upon his reacquisition of Hawai‘i’s independence from Britain. Ea in this motto is often read as “life” – “the life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness.” However, in its first incarnation, ea here referred to the sovereignty of the land, which has never been lost, but continues in righteousness. The final section of the anthology takes on the idea of sovereignty, specifically the importance of clarifying the differences between understanding Hawai‘i as an always sovereign nation under illegal occupation rather than as a group (tribe) of colonized people. The final six chapters recount the evolution of the sovereignty movement from one focused on decolonization and fighting for reparations and nation-within-nation status, to a more nuanced understanding of Hawai‘i as an illegally occupied sovereign state whose government and people have never relinquished our independence.

In most cases, referring to Hawai‘i as illegally occupied will guarantee one is met with reactions ranging from hostility, to irritation, to outright claims of insanity. I am speaking from personal experience here, although I am certain this experience is not mine alone. The level of misunderstanding surrounding the illegal occupation of Hawai‘i is on par with that of the meaning of Hawaiian sovereignty itself. That is, those who inhabit the islands but who are not of Kanaka descent often respond to calls for sovereignty with panic – *what does this mean for me?* they ask. *Where will I live?* they wonder, despite the fact that non-Hawaiians lived in these islands under Kanaka rule for a longer period of time than they have lived here under US occupation. A less nuanced response is generally some variation of, “the government says that is
not true,” or, “by your rationale the entire US is illegally occupied.” Well … yes… it is. While there is neither the time nor the space to delve into the illegal occupation of Turtle Island (otherwise known as the continental US and Canada), the endemic ignorance of US and Hawaiian history is the result of a shared intentional obfuscation and rewriting of Indigenous nations’ histories; in Hawai‘i’s case, one that was hidden by the US government until 1969 – only four and a half decades ago.

The confusion around Hawaiian sovereignty and US occupation is not reserved for non-Hawaiians. Even amongst Kanaka ourselves, there is little agreement on the definitions, methods, or repercussions of achieving full independence. Kūhiō Vogeler’s chapter, “Outside Shangri La,” tells the story of Kanalu Young, a student of Haunani-Kay Trask and an influential scholar in his own right. A quadriplegic since the age of fifteen, Young’s life and struggle to rebuild his strength is retold as it “mirrors the evolution of political discourse” on Hawai‘i’s fight for independence (p. 252). As Young and the sovereignty movement evolved side by side, both arrived at a new understanding of Hawai‘i as a sovereign nation state under illegal US occupation. Vogeler’s essay details in no uncertain terms the “legal facts under international law” which confirm Hawai‘i’s status as illegally occupied. He further explains the evolution of the two main arms of the sovereignty movement: one seeking federal recognition and reparations (beginning with the ALOHA Association in 1974), another arguing that Hawai‘i is an illegally occupied sovereign nation. Vogeler proposes that part of the contemporary rift within the larger movement is due to the lack of understanding or deliberate clarification of a distinction between the two models (colonization versus occupation), initially in the 1980s, and again a decade and a half later after the passage of the US “Apology Resolution” (US Public Law 103-150, 1994).2

Upon his passing in 2008, Kanalu Young’s scholarship and teaching at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa was responsible for the shift in discourse from decolonization to “occupation theory” as a lens through which to understand and unify the Hawaiian Sovereignty movement. Although there is still no universal adherence to occupation theory within the movement, Young’s work has paved the way for a new generation of scholars and activists who have taken occupation theory as their theoretical framework as they teach and lead the new generation. His story, along with the rest of those that make up A Nation Rising, demonstrate that the fight for Hawaiian independence is alive and well, passed down as both an inherently held responsibility and explicitly taught knowledge.

Conclusion

Feeling called home by the voices in this anthology, I eagerly poured over each chapter like my six-year-old self, sitting on the lanai at my grandfather’s feet and demanding to hear more. Fluctuating between pride for my people and anger and embarrassment for my ignorance of their stories, I realized that many of these Kanaka struggles have remained unknown to me,

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2 The “Apology Resolution,” signed into law by President Bill Clinton, acknowledges that the Hawaiian people have never relinquished our rights to sovereignty.
deliberately hidden from history in both mainstream education and radical revolutionary circles. As a Kanaka in diaspora, I have always had to do the work of searching for my stories, my history, searching for some sort of evidence for my own existence. I had always attributed this to my living in California, thinking that surely my family back home, my former classmates, were receiving a different history lesson, one that could not possibly be so deeply-rooted in US colonial patriotism. This is not an uncommon experience, as today almost as many Kanaka Maoli live in California as in Hawai‘i. Yet, upon reaching out to my colleagues – fellow Kanaka Maoli scholars in varying academic fields – I found that they too were kept from learning this part of our history throughout their formal education in Hawai‘i. In addition to the lack of K-12 history texts written by and for Native Hawaiians – after all, we cannot expect the State to teach its students anything other than blind patriotism and melting pot philosophy – Kanaka struggles for sovereignty and basic human rights are also noticeably absent from the otherwise radical curriculums of university Ethnic Studies departments across the continent. With the exception of the occasional nod to Trask’s (1999) Native Daughter, Hawai‘i remains a beautiful, controversy-free, paradise and playground within the imaginations of even the most radical revolutionaries in the US.

A Nation Rising writes/rights the Hawaiian sovereignty movement into the global canon with indelible ink, making clear that it must be understood within the nationwide/worldwide context, equally important and complex as the struggle for Black liberation, Ethnic Studies movements in the US, bilingual education on the west coast of the continental US, anti-war and civil rights movements of the sixties and seventies, and so on. Chapter by chapter, this anthology answers Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999, p. 28) call for “rewriting and rightsing our position in history” and specifically within the history of worldwide social movements. Kalamaka‘āina Niheu (among many of the contributors to this book) echoes this sentiment: “We must not rely upon others to distribute the truth. The means to collect and distribute information is a critical component of educating our community and protecting our resources” (p. 177). As such, it is impossible to overstate the importance and value of this anthology to students and scholars of Hawaiian history and decolonization/de-occupation movements worldwide. Written in an accessible language with a deep sense of urgency and emotion, the book will find a home in undergraduate and graduate classes alike, as well as amongst the lay purveyor of Hawaiian history and resistance. Given the contemporary state of affairs, from corporate personhood, to burgeoning gaps between the common people and the “one percent” (contemporary land barons on par with the “Big Five”), to the cancer-like growth of US military presence around the globe, the work presented here and questions posed by its authors are all the more pressing. For Kanaka Maoli like myself, the anthology breathes life into a history long-hidden from us and provides a mirror in which we can see ourselves without the distortion of haole voices of “US History.” For the rest of the world, the book is perhaps even more important, as it leaves nowhere to hide from the ugly truths of the ongoing illegal occupation of a sovereign nation, and no way to ignore the voices of the ceaseless resistance of a nation always rising.
References


