

Jamaica Osorio's Indigenous Poetics as a Challenge to Global Hybridity

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Abstract

Speaking at a TEDx event in Manoa, O'ahu in 2013 kanaka maoli (Native Hawaiian) poet Jamaica Osorio declaimed 'Global warming will break the foundation of the community/ without even shaking the penthouse suits/ whilst the men and women who finance the earth's deterioration/ play the role of its saviour ... tallying the brown bodies that float by.'

In this article I introduce Osorio's poetry as an example of indigenous ecocriticism interacting with global power flows as she astutely pinpoints an asymmetry of causation and impact dictated by economic and racial power. Her anger is rooted in her genealogy as a kanaka maoli woman, an American citizen, a queer poet and indigenous activist. Kānaka maoli trace their genealogy back to the islands of Hawai'i, and make little distinction between human and non-human family; many feel real fury at the environmental destruction capitalist-driven development has wreaked on their islands.

Historian Arif Dirlik posited that indigenous epistemologies 'assume strategic significance' as 'counter resolutions to the contradictions of hybridity'. I suggest that Osorio's career is metonymic of the techniques kānaka maoli have used for centuries to ensure cultural survival; remaining rooted in place whilst working to build audiences and allies internationally. Osorio's poetry performances, watched on YouTube by thousands of people across the world, provide a lens through which contemporary indigeneity can be observed re-placing itself, using international networks, in a national system which continues to privilege movement over fixity regardless of the cost to the places it moves between.

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On 27 February 2010 Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio was at university in Stanford, California as a tsunami warning sounded in her hometown of Honolulu. An 8.8 magnitude earthquake had hit Chile and 35 cities on the Pacific coast were on alert. Waiting in safety, knowing that a tsunami in Hawai'i could destroy Honolulu, Osorio wrote the poem 'Day 223: Sinking Bodies'.¹

Osorio is a Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian)² poet and activist raised in the Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement and 'Day 223: Sinking Bodies' is a Slam poem she performed at the 2010 Brave New Voices 'Speak Green' competition in Los Angeles. This article uses 'Day 223:

¹ This article refers to the version of the poem published in *i ulu i ka 'āina: land*. See Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio, 'Day 223: Sinking Bodies,' *i ulu i ka 'āina: land* ed. Jonathan Osorio. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014) 1-3; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text with line numbers.

² In this article I use Kanaka Maoli and Native Hawaiian interchangeably. 'Kanaka' is singular and denotes a person, whilst 'Maoli' translates as 'real', and is a term that emphasises indigeneity to Hawai'i. 'Kānaka', with the kahakō, or macron, is plural. I am aware of the sociopolitical nuances of 'Native' and 'indigenous', both of which I use synonymously, as well as 'Hawaiian', which I use to denote nationality as opposed to ethnicity, but at all times to refer to people who are genealogically connected to the independent nation of Hawai'i prior to its occupation by the USA.

Sinking Bodies' to explore the effectiveness of ecocriticism as a framework for analysing poetry by indigenous writers, and demonstrates how Osorio's poem is rooted in specific Native Hawaiian cultural imperatives. Osorio *strategically* occupies an essentialist position relative to the violent forces the poem condemns in order to challenge notions of global hybridity that threaten indigenous sovereignty. In doing so, she marks the poem as politically as well as culturally motivated. As a poet raised in a highly political milieu, with strong Hawaiian nationalist sentiments, Osorio adopts a provocative voice in 'Day 223: Sinking Bodies' that simultaneously highlights, laments and denounces the intersections of environmental, economic and racial violence in Hawai'i.³

Although provoked by the Chilean earthquake, 'Day 223: Sinking Bodies' draws together apparently disparate phenomena, such as economic exploitation, environmental degradation, global warming and institutionalised racism, in a wider critique of interlocking power structures. Osorio creates poetic synapses through evocative metaphors where apparently separate social and environmental inequalities exchange meaning in ways that make perceptible their shared source. Whilst Osorio is not aiming to unify her themes, and indeed they remain tangled rather than imbricated, she provocatively highlights the points of contact where large, recognised injustices, such as war and racism, snag on more invisible, insidious forms of violence, such as global warming and educational inequality. In doing so, she connects issues that Norwegian sociologist and mathematician Johan Galtung terms 'structural violence',⁴ that is hierarchical social frameworks designed to control personal violence, with the kind of environmental degradation ecocritical writer Rob Nixon terms 'slow violence'⁵; and she does so within a Native Hawaiian context.

Nixon, in his seminal work, formulates 'slow violence' as the indirect, bloodless, unseen forms of death visited on wide, often poor, areas of the globe by the industry and wars of wealthy nations, corporations, organisations and individuals through phenomena such as chemical poisoning, famine and drought. The effects of these activities are often so temporally and spatially removed from their causes that they are not properly attributed and thus regularly remain unreported, unstudied and unpunished. Nixon proposes that,

in a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses. ... The narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen. (15)

Writer-activists can contribute to social memory by testifying to events that are too temporally spread to be held in inter-generational memory. Literature can draw swift connections that are difficult to demonstrate in life due to the nature of slow violence and the people on whom it tends to be inflicted: the poor, the uneducated, women and racial minorities.

³ Osorio is a part of a lineage of writers whose resistance to the overthrow of their monarchy has been ongoing since the close of the nineteenth century. Writer-activism, which was repressed in the years of the second World War and leading up to statehood in 1959, re-emerged following Hawai'i's accession to the Union. In under a decade it had formed into an outpouring of cultural activity that is now considered a Renaissance. Poetry forms one part of a multi-faceted movement, but it is a vocal and vibrant source of resistance for Hawaiians.

⁴ Johan Galtung. 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research.' *Journal of Peace Research* 6.3 (1969) 170.

⁵ Rob Nixon. *Slow Violence*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011) 10.

‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ maps the web of injustices and violence that are perceived as unconnected because of the separation of cause and effect over time and distance. Using the Chilean earthquake as a stimulus, Osorio explicitly links the effects of climate change with racism, militarism and educational inequality. In this sense, ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ is an ecocritical poem that fits well with Nixon’s formulation of writer-activist production, however ecocriticism does not fully account for Osorio’s influences and political aims, which are locally as well as globally focussed.

A reading of Native Hawaiian poetry only in terms of ecocriticism does not take into account that Native Hawaiians’ ecological consciousness is rooted in cultural connectedness to the ‘āina⁶ (earth). The kānaka maoli relationship with their environment is familial — in Hawaiian religion all Native Hawaiians are descended from the taro plant, and most elements, flora and fauna are associated with humans via family relationships. In contrast, ecocriticism is predominantly a movement from within Western thought that aims to redirect the ‘historically egocentric Western imagination toward a newly emerging ecocentric paradigm.’⁷ That is, ecocriticism offers a strategy to engage in ‘an ethical inquiry into the connections between self, society, environment and text.’⁸ In this sense Osorio’s, and many other Native Hawaiian poets’ work, is ecocritical. However, kānaka maoli writers, who might otherwise be described as ecopoetic, are writing from within, rather than against, a cultural position; their tradition is not ‘historically egocentric.’ Aloha ‘āina, which means love of the land in Hawaiian, is one expression of the fundamental genealogical relationship between Hawaiians and Hawai‘i. Native Hawaiian writers who take what appears to be an environmental stance, whether or not they explicitly lay claim to their specific cultural heritage, are deeply embedded in their particular cultural and political milieu.⁹

It is at this point when some ecocritical labels, particularly regarding ecopoetics, become inappropriate for Native Hawaiian poets more generally and Osorio particularly. Dictums such as Bate’s, that ‘ecopoetics must concern itself with consciousness. When it comes to practice, we have to speak in other discourses,’¹⁰ does not easily accommodate writer-activists who are concerned with both consciousness and practice. Osorio’s writing is most particularly concerned with practice, with activism and with indigenous nationalism. Her expressions of dismay at environmental degradation are not laments for a pristine earth free from human interference, but a strategic call for cultural amelioration, rooted in the belief that indigenous knowledge can contribute to the continuation of a human existence more in harmony with specific local environments. The distinction often made in ecocriticism between the ‘rich nation environmentalism’ of the north and the ‘environmentalism of the poor’ in the global south often leaves out indigenous populations, such as Native Hawaiians, who live within the borders of

⁶ I have not italicised Hawaiian words because they are not foreign or ‘other’ to the poet, text or context discussed here. Modern spellings are used, selected from Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert. *Hawaiian Dictionary: Hawaiian-English, English-Hawaiian*. Rev. and Enl. Ed edition. (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1986).

⁷ Erika Lemmer. ‘Ecocriticism.’ *Journal of Literary Studies* 23.3 (2007): 224.

⁸ Lemmer, 225.

⁹ Aloha ‘āina can be translated as ‘patriotism’ and has been a rallying call for anti-settler colonial struggles since the nineteenth century. Trask explains that aloha ‘āina is a responsibility to reciprocity: the land feeds humans who, in return, care for it. The saying has become political only by virtue of American settler colonialism, which seeks to disconnect Native Hawaiians from the land to legitimise occupation. See Haunani-Kay Trask. *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai‘i*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1999) 128.

¹⁰ Jonathon Bate. *The Song of the Earth*. (London: Picador, 2000) 266.

those rich northern nations but through institutional disadvantage have not shared equally in their fellow citizens' wealth. These peoples have also simultaneously had their culture, fundamentally tied to their landscape, stripped out from beneath them.¹¹ Whilst acknowledging that modern ecocritical frameworks have value for explicating the symptoms 'Day 223: Sinking Bodies' describes, and postcolonialism can offer incisive diagnoses of the underlying causes, its political potential as a strategically essentialist, indigenous work requires a different analytical focus.

Osorio's writing is rooted in her Hawaiian culture in more specific, literary ways than may at first appear to a predominantly non-Hawaiian audience. Like much of her work, 'Day 223: Sinking Bodies' is able to simultaneously speak to multiple audiences, who have differing levels of Hawaiian cultural awareness.¹² This is because a fundamental aspect of the Hawaiian language is *kaona*, which is a rhetorical device that encapsulates a number of poetic practices, such as allusion, metaphor, symbolism, and 'hidden meanings.'¹³ Poetry, in the Western sense, is the closest literary form to the traditional Hawaiian *mele* (encompassing song, chant and poetry) and is most suited to the use of metaphor. Poetry is often a political medium for Hawaiian writers because its capacity to accommodate *kaona* enables them to both reveal and conceal meaning to different audiences. This allows varying levels of inclusion and exclusion according to the cultural awareness of the audience. McDougall and Nordstrom explain that:

The expected role of the Hawaiian audience in this exchange is to look for and detect *kaona* in a composition so as to relate the numerous and varied allusions to their prior knowledge and experiences. In effect, those audience members who find the *kaona* and its meaning(s) are rewarded with a sense of exclusivity shared between the composer and all who 'find' the 'hidden meaning,' thereby receiving the 'insider' knowledge embedded within a composition. (101)

As 'Day 223: Sinking Bodies' was originally composed as a Slam poem and performed live, the connection with the audience is paramount to the poem's success. Slam is a competitive format that uses strict time parameters (three minutes) to compel the performer to engage their audience quickly. Techniques such as heightened vocal ranges in performance, the inclusion of song lyrics, rhyme, rhythm, and repetition help performers convey a message directly and emotively.¹⁴ As an accomplished Slam performer Osorio employs many of the recognisable rhetorical techniques of a Slam poem that are accessible to a wide audience, but also employs *kaona* in her work.

¹¹ This form of displacement without crossing (official state/ national) borders is described by Nixon as 'the loss of the land and resources beneath [people], a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable' (19). Native Hawaiians suffered exactly this sort of displacement.

¹² There is, of course, always a variation between the pre-existing knowledge of audience members, which becomes even more pronounced across global audiences connected via the internet, or international readerships. However, *kaona* accommodates relative variations in order to produce different connections with different audience members. A summary of this poetic practice, and the role of the audience in the production of *kaona*, can be found in Brandy Nālani McDougall and Georganne Nordstrom. 'Ma Ka Hana Ka Brandy Nālani McDougall and Georganne Nordstrom, 'Ma Ka Hana Ka'Ike (In the Work Is the Knowledge): *Kaona* as Rhetorical Action.' *College Composition and Communication* 63.1 (2011): 100-101.

¹³ George Hu'e Sanford Kanahale. *Kū Kanaka, Stand Tall: A Search for Hawaiian Values*. (University of Hawai'i Press, 1993) 44, 48, 58, 145.

¹⁴ Susan B. A. Somers-Willett. *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009) 31.

'Day 223: Sinking Bodies' doesn't so much *use* kaona, as *embody* it. The poem is written and performed entirely in English, although Osorio is herself bilingual, and its social justice message, although illustrated with Hawaiian examples, is relevant to many Pacific, and other island, nations. However, Osorio makes several choices that embed kaona meanings with a particularly Hawaiian focus. The most prominent of these is the decision to frame the poem with lyrics remixed from the chorus of Maroon 5's song 'Harder to Breathe.'¹⁵ In performance, the poem is prefaced with Osorio singing a slowed down, melancholic version of the song's chorus.¹⁶ In print, the song lyrics are distinguished from the rest of the poem typographically:

*When it gets cold outside and you got nobody to love
understand what I mean when I say there's no way we are gonna give up
like a little girl cries in her bed at a monster who lives in her dream
is there anyone out there cuz it's getting harder and harder to breathe (1-4)*

Osorio's selection and use of these lyrics works as a prescient opening to a poem about unseen, 'monstrous' forces affecting the planet. As the poem progresses and the scope of Osorio's critique widens, most listeners/ readers will be able to decipher that air pollution, rising sea levels and the threat of tsunamis all constitute a threat to free breathing. Each of these things are certainly one level of the poem's meaning, but in Hawaiian culture breath and breathing hold particular kaona.¹⁷ Kunisue explains that an 'Hawai'ian's [sic] breath is expressed in the sound of *ha*, and the actual meaning is 'breath of life' or 'divine breath.'¹⁸ The word *hā* mimics the sound a breath makes, and is in this way onomatopoeic. Aloha, a famous Hawaiian word, whilst it has almost a hundred meanings, is built of *alo* and *ha*, which literally means 'to be with/ to embrace the divine breath.'¹⁹ One of the reasons performing poetry is so crucial for Hawaiian poets is because of the spiritual elements of sharing breath, voice and language. To share breath is to share a spiritual or living connection with a person. To give words breath that is intentional and purposeful is to imbue those words with life, and, crucially, to allow them to change the speaker.²⁰ Within this context, it is clear that Osorio's call for a more sensitive and long-term

¹⁵ Maroon 5, 'Harder to Breathe' *Songs About Jane*. By Adam Levine. 9 July 2002. Prod. Matt Wallace. Octone, J Records, BMG. 2002. CD.

¹⁶ This article refers to two recorded performances that can be accessed online. See Jamaica Osorio. 'Sinking Bodies.' *YouTube*. 16 October 2010. Accessed 20 March 2017, and 'Poetry as translation: Jamaica Osorio at TEDxManoa.' *YouTube* TEDx Talks, 28 October 2013. Accessed 20 March 2017.

¹⁷ As 'Day 223: Sinking Bodies' is now both recorded and published, it is available for an audience with less initial cultural knowledge to watch/read repeatedly, and, in principle, to uncover kaona for themselves. As a non-Hawaiian, this is my technique for analysing Osorio's work. However, a performance poem's effect is measured initially on the audience present, and their response can be mediated only via their immediate understanding of the poem, rather than meaning revealed later through study.

Whether or not the audience is Native Hawaiian, a certain level of knowledge of Native Hawaiian culture is necessary to look for and interpret kaona. In any performance or piece of writing the full kaona may be 'known only to the raconteur and one or two special members of the audience . . . while everyone else remains oblivious to the message.' Lilikalā K. Kame'eleihiwa, 'Introduction.' *A Legendary Tradition of Kamapua'a: The Hawaiian Pig God* trans. Kame'eleihiwa. (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1996) ix.

¹⁸ Yukari Kunisue. 'Listening to the Natural World: Ecopsychology of Listening from a Hawai'ian Spiritual Perspective,' *Voice and Environmental Communication* ed. Jennifer Peebles and Stephen Depoe. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 233.

¹⁹ Kunisue, 233.

²⁰ Kanahēle, 45.

approach to environmental policy is deeply embedded in her commitment to Native Hawaiian culture, which finds its expression through her political activism.

No‘ukahau‘oli Revilla, a poet and contemporary of Osorio’s, has explained her understanding that words themselves have the ability, when spoken with consideration and understanding, to alter the speaker — even if s/he did not originally compose them.²¹ Another Native Hawaiian poet, Brandy Nālani McDougall has written that,

... words have the power to actualize, to be either life giving or destructive. Words ... circulate in our communities, are repeated over and over, are empowered by belief and intention, and in turn, come to have mana and lives of their own. In particular, because the spoken word is transmitted ‘through the hā, or breath, we infuse mana into the sound, hence [empowering] the meaning or intent of the word.’²²

When the Hawaiian understanding of breath and breathing is made clear, Osorio’s lament that it is getting ‘harder and harder to breathe’ takes on a deeper and more distressing significance as a lament for cultural loss through environmental jeopardy. However, it also demonstrates how, for Native Hawaiians, to write and speak is to act in a way that has a tangible and physical effect on yourself and your community. Osorio’s resistance is closely connected to her place in the Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement, which relies on, and nourishes, strong ties with the ‘āina (land) of Hawai’i.²³ For Osorio, being engaged in the project of writer-activism is to be engaged with a cultural heritage that she simultaneously performs and embodies.

‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ is framed by the names of three countries, Haiti, Chile and Indonesia, that suffered earthquakes of varying severity in 2010. The earthquakes were both the inspiration for the poem and a suitable metaphor for its action. Earthquakes are sudden and violent events that are measurable and, to an extent, time-bound. They constitute an ‘event’ that attracts media and narrative attention, as attested to by the existence of ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’. However, like a poem, the lasting impact of an earthquake is much wider and more deeply felt in ways that are more difficult to measure, and rarely attract the same attention the original event (performance) garnered.

The lasting human impact of an earthquake is not only affected by geological differences but also by social, economic and political realities that affect the preparedness of the affected communities. The earthquake in Haiti, for example, has been described as an ‘unmitigated disaster’ in which nearly a quarter of a million people died – much higher than for quakes of similar magnitudes in other countries – yet the real death toll from disease, due to a systemic

²¹ Scanlan. Personal Interview, 20 March 2015.

²² Brandy Nālani McDougall. *Finding Meaning: Kaona and Contemporary Hawaiian Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016) 3

²³ Whilst an analysis of the Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement is not the purpose of this article, it is worth noting that Native Hawaiian nationalism is neither monolithic nor has only ‘environmental justice’ as its motivation. For an overview of the main organisations working towards sovereignty see Lilikalā Kame‘eleihiwa, ‘Preface: Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement’ *Islands in Captivity: The Record of the International Tribunal on the Rights of Indigenous Hawaiians*, ed. Ward Churchill and Sharon H. Venne (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2004) xvii-xxvii, particularly xx-xxi.

lack of adequate housing, healthcare and education, is much higher.²⁴ In his analysis of violence Galtung explains that,

Violence is that which increases the distance between the potential [for violence] and the actual [violence experienced], and that which impedes the decrease of this distance. Thus ... the case of people dying from earthquakes today would not warrant an analysis in terms of violence, but the day after tomorrow, when earthquakes may become avoidable, such deaths may be seen as the result of violence. (168-9)

He notes that 'structural violence' is present in the avoidable differences between individuals' and societies' abilities to cope with and survive an earthquake.²⁵ If a city is well-built, with strict building codes, and good quality materials, their citizens' chances of survival are increased. Education, public awareness, health care, communications infrastructure, seismic monitoring, emergency response capabilities, and even exposure to foreign media all contribute to the likelihood of surviving an event like an earthquake.²⁶ However, these factors, and more importantly the origins of their failings, are rarely taken into account when assessing the impact of natural disasters.

As Nixon suggests, the disconnect between the temporal measurement of an event and the true extent of its effects is in itself an act of representational bias that obscures systemic inequalities that contribute to the survival chances of communities hit by seismic and meteorological events.²⁷ Towards the end of the poem Osorio argues that 'there is nothing 'natural' about the way we have destroyed our planet' (76), reading beyond the 'natural disaster' to insist that there is responsibility, and therefore need for remedial action, beyond the immediate, apparently politically neutral, disaster relief.

Osorio's performance of 'Day 223: Sinking Bodies' is a time-bound event (though infinitely repeatable through recordings), but contributes to a broader discourse on climate change (globally), rising sea levels (particularly in the Pacific), political apathy, racism and educational underfunding (in the USA and, in particular, Hawai'i). However, Osorio manages to retain specificity to Hawai'i that avoids rhetorical redundancy and retains the poem's emotive power. The potential of such creative discourse to alter the outcome of current trends in environmental policy remains unmeasured (and perhaps unmeasurable), but by framing her protest with these particular earthquakes Osorio captures the energy of the immediate disaster and uses it to illuminate the darker corners of state and national violence, particularly with regard to Native Hawaiians.

The description of the earthquake itself sets up the us/ them binary that forms the crux of the poem's protest:

They call this Global Warming
the climate correcting itself
I call it earth rattling

²⁴ Heriberta Castaños and Cinna Lomnitz. *Earthquake Disasters in Latin America: A Holistic Approach* (New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2012) 41-44, 58.

²⁵ Galtung, n.3 186-7.

²⁶ Castaños and Lomnitz, 43-44.

²⁷ Nixon, 13.

quaking
plates shifting
tsunami lifting
the sea is rising (17-25)

By taking the impersonal language of science and invoking the pseudo-omniscient ‘they,’ familiar to readers of mainstream media reports of scientific research, Osorio forms a contrast with the consonantal experience of the ‘I’ in an earthquake. By capitalising ‘Global Warming,’ Osorio directs the poem, at least obliquely, at both scientists and global warming deniers, pointing out that those involved in the political and scientific debates are rarely those on the front line of climate change and its devastating impacts.

Utilising the full capability of poetry to make connections swiftly she continues:

brown bodies are born asthmatic choking from first inhale
running from an aquatic mountain
it is no wonder we cannot breathe (30-32)

Here, Osorio introduces the racialisation of suffering, iterating that ‘brown bodies’ are born at a disadvantage. Native Hawaiians have devastatingly low health outcomes compared to people of Japanese, Chinese or white ancestry.²⁸ By speaking of ‘brown bodies,’ Osorio is exposing the racial dimension of ignorance/ being ignored, and deliberately conflates economic and racial marginalisation with the impact of globalisation and militarism on Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders:

unloading our brown bodies over seas to fight ‘terrorism’ will not lighten our
island enough to keep it afloat (68-69)

These lines are an adept play on words that point towards the disproportionately large number of Native Hawaiians who enter the US military services. Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (who are often considered together for statistical analysis)²⁹ are overrepresented by 249% in relation to population proportion – a situation that is deeply related to institutional racism, entrenched indigenous economic disadvantage and cultural degradation – and one that is broadly congruent across the United States.³⁰

By forming relationships between ostensibly disparate problems Osorio allows the audience to deepen the connections according to their knowledge of specific local events. Making full use of the word ‘light’s homonymic potential, Osorio references the US’s assimilationist policies directed at Native Hawaiians, and the net immigration of haole (Caucasian) Americans to

²⁸ Across weight, addiction, depression, suicide and incidence of terminal illness Native Hawaiians score the lowest of Hawai‘i’s demographics. See Yanyan Wu et al. ‘Life Expectancies in Hawai‘i: A Multi-Ethnic Analysis of 2010 Life Tables,’ *Hawai‘i Journal of Medicine & Public Health* 76.1 (2017): 12-13.

²⁹ For an analysis of the political implications of this conflation of Hawaiian and Pacific Islander see Lisa Kahaleole Hall. ‘Which of These Things Is Not Like the Other: Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders Are Not Asian Americans, and All Pacific Islanders Are Not Hawaiian,’ *Pacific Currents, Special Issue of American Quarterly*. 67.3 (2015): 727-747.

³⁰ Tim Kane. ‘Who Bears the Burden?: Demographic Characteristics of U.S. Military Recruits Before and After 9/11,’ *A Report of the Heritage Centre for Data Analysis* (Washington: The Heritage Foundation, 2005) 11.

Hawai‘i, which means that Native Hawaiians are an ethnic minority in their own homeland.³¹ The inclusion of quotation marks around ‘terrorism,’ which is mirrored in Osorio’s performance of the poem,³² reflects an ingrained scepticism in many Hawaiian nationalists about the motivations of US military incursions in the Middle East, particularly regarding questions of resource exploitation and the promotion of democratic systems of government.³³ Whilst each of these areas are substantial areas of concern, activism and research in themselves, Osorio uses her rhetorical skill to provide a fleeting-but-persuasive argument for their interconnectedness. The claim that wars overseas will not halt the rising waters at home remains an explicit and central synapse where the overt violence of war exchanges responsibility with the slow violence of climate change.

Osorio’s poem is at its most evocative and impactful when illustrating the convergence of wealth, power, race and responsibility:

Global Warming will break the foundation of a community without even shaking
the penthouse suit
so while the men and women who finance the earth’s deterioration play the role of
its savior
sipping martinis in hybrid glass bottom boats tallying the brown bodies that float
by
this society’s roots are sinking in quicksand (34-40)

Here the hypocrisy of the words and policies of wealthy nations and corporations are succinctly pinpointed by contrasting their alleged role as environmental ‘saviors’ with the reality of their actions. The ecocritical implications of Osorio’s derogatory use of the word ‘hybrid’ points towards an indictment of the hypocrisy of the ‘clean energy’ industry, which includes the tourist industry’s promotion of ‘ecotourism’ that remains reliant on decidedly unclean air-travel to Hawai‘i. However, the term has a more complex history for indigenous people as a celebration of hybridity weakens bonds with place and amplifies the cultural, ethnic and racial mixing that has repeatedly been used as a weapon against indigenous people.

Since 1928, Hawaiians have been legally defined by their percentage of blood quantum derived from their relatedness to the people residing in Hawai‘i prior to 1778. There is no simple definition of ‘Hawaiian’ as the original rules have been altered in different contexts,³⁴ but almost every official definition is in some way derived from blood quantum classification, which J. Kēhaulani Kauanui describes as a ‘predicament’ that ‘has long divided the Hawaiian

³¹ Wu et al. 9,13.

³² TEDx Talks, 2:57.

³³ For example Haunani-Kay Trask’s opinion of President Barak Obama’s policies in Afghanistan, expressed in a 2010 interview with Eiko Kosasa.

Journey to Justice: A Conversation With Dr. Haunani-Kay Trask. Centre for Hegemony Studies, Center for Hawaiian Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa. Film. 2010, 23:42.

³⁴ Office of Hawaiian Affairs Data Book for a comprehensive overview of definitions of (n/Native) Hawaiian across federal and state agencies, private and non-profit organisations. ‘Racial-Ethnic Identification’ *Appendix: Data Book.* OHA, 24 March 2017 http://www.ohadatabook.com/fr_appendix.11.html

community.’³⁵ In these terms, a celebration of hybridity has serious consequences for indigenous people.

In his discussion of indigenous opposition to hybridity, and the purpose of adopting strategically essentialist positions in questions of identity politics, historian Arif Dirlik notably argues that opposition to globalisation, in the form of indigenous nationalism, is necessary for creating the conditions whereby viable alternatives can be born.³⁶ Using a framework of place versus space to theorise indigenous nationalism versus globalised flows of economic and social power, what could reasonably be called neo-colonialism, he argues that the opposition between place, a locally constructed geographical referent, and space, an international or supra-national construct of economic flows, is necessary to challenge notions of hybridity which have allowed the encroachment of the global into the local and the domination of place by space.³⁷ Dirlik expressly names indigenous people as one of the groups whose identity is ‘deconstructed’ by hybrid re-renderings of the place/ space dichotomy, and reasserts the possibility that indigenous people’s being-in-place offers a strategic alternative to hegemonic power structures, because ‘they point to the re-conquest of space by place as an irreducible goal.’³⁸ He has criticised the mobilisation of hybridity ‘as [an] alibi against such conflicts’ which ‘does not just deconstruct power [but] also deconstructs claims to identity in legitimisation of rethinking modernity, and the designing of alternative projects.’³⁹ Dirlik also argues that ‘ecological conceptions of place have some crucial insights to contribute by bringing nature into the conceptualization of place,’ which aligns with indigenous relationships with the earth.⁴⁰

Anthropologist Jonathan Friedman has criticized the notion of hybridity for labelling any form of successful identification as hegemonisation, arguing that because ‘a hybrid has an internal structure of its own, which is just as unitary as that of any ‘purer’ organism (whatever that might mean)’, an ambivalence is created because new binaries are created: ‘unity versus confusion; organization versus juxtaposition.’⁴¹ Friedman sees the spectre of class in self-designations of hybridity, noting that whilst it expresses the reality of ‘the post-modern

³⁵ Kauanui argues that ‘the colonial legacies of blood quantum politics continue to impact contemporary Native Hawaiian struggles for land and recognition,’ because when Hawaiians ‘mix’ racially and culturally, even today, they are subject to reductive laws that reduce access or disqualify them from receiving the same support as native Hawaiians (small ‘n’), who are defined by the OHA as those with a blood quantum of at least 50%. See J. Kēhaulani Kauanui. *Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism and the Politics of Sovereignty and Indigeneity*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008) 171; and OHA ‘Racial-Ethnic Identification’ n.p.

³⁶ Arif Dirlik. ‘Place-Based Imagination: Globalism and the Politics of Place.’ *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 22.2 (1999): 180.

³⁷ In Dirlik’s analysis ‘... places are not given, but produced by human activity, which implies that how we imagine and conceive places is a historical problem. In its most recent manifestation, place consciousness is closely linked to, and appears as the radical other of that other conspicuous phenomenon of the last decade, globalism’ (151). I agree with Dirlik’s definition of globalism as ‘a signifier for certain processes (economic, political, social, and cultural)’ (154), and in this analysis those processes manifest in their negative effects on global temperature changes and environmental degradation, framed within Osorio’s indigenous Hawaiian ‘place-consciousness.’

³⁸ Dirlik, 181.

³⁹ Dirlik, 180.

⁴⁰ Dirlik, 154.

⁴¹ Jonathan Friedman ‘Global Crises, the Struggle for Cultural Identity and Intellectual Porkbarrelling: Cosmopolitans Versus Locals, Ethnics and Nationals in an Era of De-hegemonisation,’ *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism* ed. Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood 2nd edition. (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2015) 87.

cosmopolitan' its main fallacy lies in its pretence to describe the lives of ordinary people.⁴² He warns that hybridity is predicated on the 'presumption of once pure cultures that may have existed before the age of international capital,'⁴³ which sounds strikingly similar to the essentialist discourses it seeks to undermine. In this context, Osorio's decision to inhabit an activist, indigenous voice can be seen as utilising an essentialist position against powerful global economic and political forces that have detrimental local impacts.

However, the crux of the dilemma of essentialism in indigenous identity, its relationship with the theoretical category 'hybridity' and its deployment as a 'strategy' is elucidated by Avril Bell as 'ignor[ing] the point that the 'substance' claimed in the practice of political representation [of identity] does matter' to indigenous people.⁴⁴ Osorio juxtaposes the people 'who finance the earth's deterioration' (36) with 'the brown bodies that float by' (38), and it is clear that she aligns herself with the latter. The image of martini sipping oligarchs in a glass-bottomed boat seems a blackly-humorous metaphor for Noah's Ark — except this time they're only letting the light-skinned, wealthy and 'privately educated' (49) on board. The voyeuristic overtones of the sightseeing boat is both a pointed reference to the visibility of the injustices to those with the will to look, and a criticism of the media-watching public (which ironically this time includes Osorio herself), which tallies the brown bodies and watches the water levels rise. Wealth and power appear to engender a sense of immunity from the effects of globalisation's excesses. Osorio's position as an educated, comparatively wealthy Hawaiian studying at Stanford makes the position of the speaker in this poem, which is aligned in performance with Osorio herself,⁴⁵ both essentialist (as it is racialised and class-inflected) and strategic (as these are only comparatively relevant to Osorio).⁴⁶

Tackling Spivak's formulation of 'strategic essentialism' Bell argues that indigenous use of strategic essentialism is not ultimately aimed at dismantling all 'essentialist' identities including their own (as Spivak argues class does), but in fact seeks to maintain their difference and re-gain autonomy. 'Inclusion and equality on any other basis [than the 'Aboriginal dominant'] would suggest the success of the colonial project of assimilation,'⁴⁷ which is represented in 'Day 223: Sinking Bodies' by the societies responsible for global warming.

Osorio's emphasis on the long-term effects of political decisions is maintained through her attention to the inter-generational legacy of education quality, which she explicitly connects to global warming. Osorio is a passionate believer in the power of education to alter the course of history, and is scathing about the quality of education available in Hawai'i:

⁴² Friedman, 81.

⁴³ Friedman, 73.

⁴⁴ Avril Bell. *Relating Indigenous and Settler Identities: Beyond Domination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 120.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the imbrication of narrative and performer voices in performance poetry see Somers-Willett, 93.

⁴⁶ It is worth noting, however, that Native Hawaiians have had their indigenous identities questioned due to their choosing to study and live in the continental states. Haunani-Kay Trask's indigenous identity in particular has come under attack because she was born in the San Francisco Bay area (where her father was at law school). For an example of such attitudes see Ken Conklin 'Haunani-Kay Trask Biographical Information' n.d. n.p. <http://www.angelfire.com/hi2/hawaiiansovereignty/TraskBio.html>.

The 'decision' to move away from Hawai'i is often strongly influenced by family networks, high living costs and wanting to study a particular subject not offered at the University of Hawai'i. See Trask, 17.

⁴⁷ Bell, 121.

our hands above our heads trying to form prayers for relief funds
hoping
that the government might soon start funneling money back into education
so the next generation,
if there is one,
will learn how to prevent this from ever happening again
it is as if the government thinks that if we are uneducated we won't be able to be
ashamed of them. (41-8)

Like most kānaka maoli activists before her,⁴⁸ Osorio reaches beyond an indigenous-essentialist position towards a more class-inflected differentiation with her criticism of Hawai'i State's policies on education. She has good reason; 'Day 223: Sinking Bodies' refers to 'Furlough Fridays', which was Hawaiian Governor Linda Lingal's preferred method of clawing back a budget deficit by reducing the school week to four days in 2009.⁴⁹ Low-income families, who couldn't afford childcare, and the children themselves, were most deeply affected.

At this point in the poem Osorio uses the flexibility of her medium to emotively shift between four substantial topics and allow her audience to fill in the gaps. She writes:

instead of cutting from our 1 trillion dollar war
we've taken school days from our offspring
and we all know the environment is dying because our legislation is failing to
teach our children to sprout through concrete (61-64)

The proximity of militarism, education, environmentalism and policy is somewhat overwhelming, but the links deserve unpacking. The military presence is huge in Hawai'i, and on O'ahu particularly. Approximately 47,000 active and reserve military are stationed in Hawai'i, with a further 18,800 military civilians — this makes it the ninth-largest state for the military in the USA.⁵⁰ They, and the millions of tourists who descend on the fragile archipelago, are serviced by a multi-million dollar hotel and service industry, which takes space and resources away from local people and Native Hawaiians.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Most notable George Helm. See Rodney Morales 'George Helm – The Voice and Soul' *Ho 'i Ho 'i Hou: A Tribute to George Helm & Kimo Mitchell* ed. Rodney Morales. (Honolulu, Hawaii: Bamboo Ridge Pr, 1984) 14.

⁴⁹ In 2009-10 Hawai'i faced a deficit of \$1 billion and Gov. Lingle implemented a programme of furloughing schoolchildren that was intended to cut 34 school days over two years. Public resistance meant that 17 Fridays were eventually cut, meaning the state had the shortest school year in the country at just 126 days. Working parents had to take unpaid or holiday leave, rely on family support, or pay \$25-\$50 per-child per-week in care costs.

See Suzanne Roig. 'How Hawai'i's Budget Led to Furloughed Kids'. *Time Magazine*. 24 October 2009. Accessed 20 March 2017 <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1932079,00.html> and Michael Cooper 'Governments Go to Extremes as the Downturn Wears On'. *The New York Times*. 6 August 2010. Accessed 20 March 2017.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/07/us/07cutbacksWEB.html>

⁵⁰ Data current 31 December 2016. 'Counts of Active Duty and Reserve Service Members and APF Civilians,' DoD Personnel, Workforce Reports & Publications. DMDC. https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp. Accessed 21 March 2017.

⁵¹ Ramsay Remigius Mahealani Taum, 'Tourism,' *The Value of Hawaii: Knowing the Past and Shaping the Future* ed. Craig Howes and Jon Osorio (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010) 31-32.

As previously mentioned, a large number of young Native Hawaiians choose an itinerant military career as their most viable employment option. Formal education, when culturally irrelevant, is ill equipped to provide the skills children (particularly Native Hawaiian children) need to thrive in their particular locale.⁵² Osorio's point is that mainstream education will not compensate for the cultural removal and health burden experienced by Native Hawaiian children as their lives become increasingly urbanised and industrialised. Osorio forms an elliptical point: education that fails to teach ecological sensitivity stores up problems for the future, as generations ignorant of their environment make poor decisions on both micro and macro levels, and a damaged environment lowers the health and wellbeing outcomes of future children, exacerbating the cycle.

Osorio extends her point in the next line, demanding 'enough with the quick-fix band aids and budget cuts,' which recognizes the tendency to make short-term political decisions in response to specific events, without addressing long-term implications. Nixon analyses such short-termism as at least partially a consequence of representational bias towards dramatic violent events and against slow violence. In an increasingly digital age where access to vast volumes of information is becoming (at least for those with internet access) normal, our brains are adapting to concentrating on multiple information sources but for shorter periods of time.⁵³ This 'age of degraded attention spans' makes focussing public attention and state policy on long-term, intergenerational problems harder, and recording the true effects across dozens, even hundreds of years, even more difficult.⁵⁴ As Nixon puts it, 'fast is faster than it used to be', and 'in this cultural milieu of digitally speeded up time, and foreshortened narrative, the intergenerational aftermath becomes a harder sell.'⁵⁵

Osorio is utilising an art form that is specifically designed to be time-bound and immediate, in keeping with the technology-driven, attention-deficient generation of which she is a part, to call for a long-term perspective on social and environmental ills that traverse generations. Towards the end of the poem Osorio's indictments become even harsher. She demands:

Don't let the rhetoric fool you
there is nothing natural about the way we've destroyed our planet
Haiti is just 9/11 from a different angle
we are our own worst enemies
terrorists dressed as 'patriots' (75-79)

This echoes environmental writer Jill Schneiderman's argument that we must resist pervasive economic and political influences that aim to persuade us that environmental degradation is somehow inevitable.⁵⁶ Osorio ends the poem with a derisive challenge:

it is time to decide
who is gonna be **privileged** enough to survive

⁵² For an epistemological analysis of Hawaiian culture in education see Manu Aluli Meyer, 'Native Hawaiian Epistemology: Sites of Empowerment and Resistance,' *Equity & Excellence in Education* 31.1 (1998): 27.

⁵³ Nixon 12.

⁵⁴ Nixon, 12-13.

⁵⁵ Nixon, 13.

⁵⁶ Jill S. Schneiderman 'Awake in the Anthropocene.' *Contemporary Buddhism* 13.1 (2012): 90.

next time (83-84)

Sea-levels are rising. Unequal wealth distribution and persistent racism means the effects are borne by the impoverished many, rather than the responsible few. But, as Osorio points out, there is a decision to be made. If we work to make invisible violence visible, and hold perpetrators of 'slow violence' responsible as tenaciously as we do for traditionally recognised forms of violence, we could, potentially, change the tide. In the meantime, Osorio is standing and speaking; lending her breath to a genealogy of voices which connect indigenous knowledge of truly sustainable land management with the communication potential of our modern world.

Emma Scanlan's AHRC funded doctoral research centred on the relationship between Native Hawaiian poetry and politics, and extended into areas of ecocriticism, indigenous epistemology, mana wahine (women's power), and identity formation. She co-organised of the Pacific Waves Conference, held at the University of Sussex, which aims to create conversations between scholars of the Pacific in the UK and internationally.

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