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Reimagining Nature in Selected Hawaiian Literature: An Indigenous Ecological Perspective

Abstract. This study analyzes four selected works of Hawaiian literature, focusing on the refiguration of nature, presenting it as an active and conscious subject. Contrary to Western anthropocentrism, which instrumentalized nature, Hawaiian literature underscores the profound interconnectedness shared between humanity and the more-than-human world. This distinctive environmental imagination permeates the narratives and rejects Western distinctions between the human and non-human realms by intertwining the supernatural and human agency. The reading of selected Hawaiian literature analyzes how nature is positioned as an active subject with its agency, not merely a passive, static setting. Personification in Hawaiian literature primarily focuses on female figures, *Pele* as the volcano goddess and various ancestral spirits known as *'aumakua*. This critique of anthropocentrism is deeply entrenched in Hawaiian cultural and spiritual traditions, where gods, goddesses, and *'aumakua* personify various elements and forces within the environment. This reimagining invites us to consider a different environmental imagination, recognizing the active agency of the non-human world. In conclusion, this study highlights how the Native Hawaiians ecological discourse seeks to reorient humanity's relationship with the natural world.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism; environmental imagination; indigenous perspective; Hawaiian literature; personification of nature

1. Introduction: Indigenous Environmental Imagination

The term Anthropocene, coined by Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen in 2002, signifies the dawn of an epoch in which human activities wield a profound and global influence over the natural environment. This paradigm recognizes humanity as a substantial ecological force, fundamentally altering the world at a planetary scale. Riordan (326) observes that the Anthropocene ushers in a new geological era, where humans emerge as a globally

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transformative species driven by scientific, technological, and material advancements that irreversibly shape the environment. Within the context of the Anthropocene, the necessity of human/non-human relationships to be redefined is paramount. Environmental ethics, a systematic exploration of the moral bonds between humans and their natural surroundings, challenges the traditional boundaries of ethical considerations by advocating for the inclusion of non-human entities, a departure from prior anthropocentric perspectives (Desjardins 17; Thompson 114). This paradigm shift prompts a reevaluation of the conventional human-agent and nature-subject binary, advocating for a more ethically grounded relationship that acknowledges human and non-human realms' interconnectedness and moral obligations.

The redefinition of nature from a passive object into active object underscores the imperative of finding alternative forms of environmental imagination. In the face of the ongoing ecological crisis, Lawrence Buell's concept of the "crisis of the imagination" becomes a pivotal point of discussion, highlighting the necessity to confront not only the tangible environmental challenges but also the cultural and imaginative facets of this predicament. Central to this reform is the critique of the deep-seated anthropocentric perspective within the Western philosophical tradition. Lynn White's article "The Historical Root of Our Ecological Crisis" underscores how the Judeo-Christian worldview, serving as the bedrock of Western thought, has historically endorsed human dominance over all life forms on Earth (6–8). Despite White's call for reform concerning this anthropocentric viewpoint, he remains doubtful about embracing alternative perspectives, like Zen Buddhism, and his call for reform remains rooted within the Western philosophical outlook. In contrast, Buell vehemently advocates for a reevaluation of Western ethical discourse:

If, as environmental philosophers contend, western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today's ecological problems, then environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination, the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it. (2)

Buell's argument asserts that the contemporary environmental crisis is intimately intertwined with a problem of imagination. This crisis of the imagination necessitates alternative avenues for depicting and engaging with the natural world. His idea expands the role of the humanities to foster a more ethical way of perceiving and interacting with nature. While nature writing has traditionally been a prominent genre within literature, it has long been dominated by the Anglo-American discourse, exemplified by canonical works such as the *Norton Book of Nature Writing* (1990), which prominently featured white authors. Many influential authors in the development of environmental literature, such as Emerson, Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson, were primarily of white

descent. The emphasis on nonfiction nature writing limited its recognition of authors exploring environmental themes in other genres, such as poetry and fiction, especially for non-Western writers (Kerridge 376; Marland 850). Glotfelty identifies how ecocriticism, initially dominated by white voices, can diversify by integrating environmental concerns with social justice issues and welcoming diverse perspectives (xxv). The pursuit of alternative environmental views intersects with the paradigms offered by indigenous communities, presenting an opportunity for a more inclusive and holistic approach to reimagining humanity's relationship with the environment.

Recent academic discourse on the environment has accommodated indigenous perspectives on the natural world, acknowledging the rich knowledge developed by these communities through their dynamic interactions with the non-human. Indigenous epistemologies, criticized as representing non-Western cultural backwardness, are now considered sustainable frameworks for reimagining humanity's place within the broader ecosystem (Buell et al. 467). Including indigenous voices such as Native Americans, First Nations, Aborigines, and Pacific Islanders incorporates insights and alternative narratives that challenge traditional Western environmental views (Kana'iaupuni and Malone; Williams and Gonzalez; Lyons). The sanctity of nature is underscored through an epistemology that highlights the interconnectedness of all entities:

For Native peoples, ecology is the cosmology of interrelatedness. This interdependent orientation includes all things within the ecosphere (planet) and above and outside of it (sun, moon, stars, planets, spirits, and ancestors). Within the material realm, there are humans and non-humans such as plants, minerals, and animals—what we call 'nature'. (Machiorlatti 65)

As previously highlighted, the cosmos and the natural world are viewed as interconnected entities forming a vast familial network within indigenous cosmology. In this perspective, human beings are regarded as just one constituent link within a larger familial structure. Representation of the natural world in indigenous cosmology vividly highlights the profound interconnectedness, revealing the kinship binding humans to the broader web of existence.

In indigenous literature, a transformative shift reimagines nature from a passive commodity/setting to an active subject, challenging conventional portrayals and refiguring the conception of nature. Regionally specific indigenous movements have traditionally revolved around the belief that the Earth embodies itself as 'lesser beings' like mountains, rivers, and lakes, transcending their material existence to signify culture-nature entities where humans and other-than-human entities coexist (Adamson 183). This perspective reflects a profound reverence for the environment and an understanding of nature as an active participant in the holistic sphere. Trask argues how "nature was not objectified

but personified, resulting in an extraordinary respect for the life of the sea, the heavens, and the earth” (18). The relationship between cultural practices and the environment is reciprocal; the arts and languages of indigenous peoples both underpin and are shaped by their distinct connection to the natural world. In this context, culture and ecology are inherently intertwined, a phenomenon also practiced by the Native Hawaiians (*Kānaka*).

The culture of Hawai'i's indigenous people, *Kānaka*, centers around nature as the fundamental cornerstone of their beliefs and way of life. Their cultural beliefs, epistemology, and philosophy place nature in high regard, imbuing it with a deep sanctity. Nature is the source of wisdom and the very foundation of *Kānaka* culture, encompassing local wisdom, prohibitions (*kapu*), genealogy, traditional knowledge, oral literature (orature), and written literature (Williams 45). The native Hawaiians and broader Polynesian communities hold deep-seated beliefs in the existence of the supernatural, superstitions, spirituality, mysticism, and the occult. The indigenous communities reject the dualism between the human world and the realm of the mystical, spiritual, and superstitious, perceiving that spirits also reside in the tangible world (Buell et al. 239). These beliefs serve as interpretive frameworks to make sense of natural phenomena that transcend conventional rational explanations. Rooted in profound reverence, awe, and respect for the enigmatic forces of nature, this Polynesian worldview underlines the intrinsic connection between culture and the environment (Armstrong 56). Personifying natural elements with human-like characteristics is viewed as one of the ways these ethnic groups illustrate their closeness to the surrounding environment.

The Hawaiian polytheistic belief system encompasses the presence of both pantheistic deities and family gods/goddesses worshipped individually or collectively. These two aspects underscore the close relationship of Hawaii's indigenous population with the surrounding environment. It is rooted in the belief that these deities, as personifications of nature, exist in the spiritual and tangible realms, coexisting with humans. The polytheistic religions of the *Kānaka* derive from the endeavor to interpret natural phenomena through the personification of deities as revered figures.

The Polynesians believed that super-normal powers pervaded nature. These powers were personified into gods, who were given certain names and particular attributes. This indigenous knowledge is not unique to Hawaiians but is shared by most indigenous peoples throughout the world. (Buck 64)

Every god and goddess are associated with specific natural forces, such as volcanic eruptions linked to the goddess *Pele* or the bestowing of rainfall by the god *Lono*. According to Malo & Emerson (135), the Hawaiian islands are believed to host an untold number of gods and goddesses, reflecting the practice of naming every natural event within the Hawaiian ethnic group. Moreover, *‘aumakua* is also an integral part of Hawaiian traditions,

serving as a means through which the *Kānaka* expresses reverence for the natural world. Within their belief system, every deceased family member is believed to merge with the surrounding environment, fostering a holistic connection and motivating the indigenous Hawaiians to preserve and care for the environment in homage to their ancestors.

This study explores the portrayal of natural forces, deity personifications, and *au-makua* in selected Hawaiian literature, shedding light on these narratives' profound cultural and ecological connections. The representation of Hawaiian gods and goddesses as personifications exemplifies the emotional proximity of indigenous Hawaiians to nature, challenging the Western dichotomy between nature and culture rooted in a reductionist and instrumentalist perspective on the non-human world (Plumwood, "Nature as Agency and the Prospects for a Progressive Naturalism" 3). The objects of study are literature written by both *Kānaka* and white (*haole*) authors, aligning with the definition of Hawaiian literature based on either geographically based or thematic². The novels analyzed include James Michener's *Hawaii* (1959), O.A. Bushnell's *Ka'a'awa* (1972), Davenport's *Shark Dialogues* (1995), and Alan Brennert's *Moloka'i* (2004). The recurring depiction of natural forces in Hawaiian literature, irrespective of historical periods and author backgrounds, underscores the central theme of reimagining nature as an active subject in Hawaiian literary discourse.

Several studies have been conducted on Hawaiian literature. Miller-Davenport examines the integration of the Hawaiian Islands as a U.S. state. By analyzing Michener's *Hawaii*, Miller-Davenport interpreted the novel as an allegory for Hawaii's political development. Miller-Davenport sees Hawaii's integration into America as a contradiction, where Hawaii becomes economically better but loses elements such as traditions and monarchy that were distinctive aspects of Hawaiian culture (817). Wyatt (126) discusses the socio-cultural transformations since the arrival of white settlers in Hawaii, with the novel *Shark Dialogues* portraying the protagonist Pono's connection to the land and the ocean as a symbol of the continuity of native Hawaiian traditions. In contrast to previous research, this study focuses on how personification, actively embodying natural forces with agency, challenges Western anthropocentrism, commodifying nature.

2 Defining Hawaiian literature is a subject of ongoing debate. Ho'omanawanui (227–28) suggests it can be geographical, including works by authors in Hawaii, or thematic, focusing on Hawaiian societal issues. However, this classification based on ethnicity is contested by Luangphinit, who argues that it oversimplifies the interconnected nature of Hawaii's population (220). Newman (46) supports this idea, stating that Hawaiian literature encompasses authors from diverse backgrounds, including *Kānaka*, white Americans, and Asian Americans.

2. Cultural Narratives of Nature: Personification in Hawaiian Literature

Hawaiian literature reimagines nature as an active, conscious agent, thus opposing Western anthropocentrism that has traditionally reduced nature to a mere commodity. This conception challenges how the representation of nature in language is often seen as a manifestation of an anthropocentric, human-oriented perspective (Oppermann 4). The linguistic portrayal of nature, whether through romanticized depictions or the untouched wilderness, is rooted in the use of language that situates humans outside the realm of nature, based on the Western culture/nature dichotomy. In other words, the representation of nature through language serves as a means for humans to position themselves as subjects and nature as an object. Similarly, Plumwood highlights the boundary between humans and nature by exposing that “anthropocentric culture often endorses a view of the human as outside, and apart from, a plastic, passive and ‘dead’ nature, which lacks agency and meaning (“Decolonizing Relationships with Nature” 54).” This dichotomy underscores the prevailing paradigm positioning humans as active subjects and nature as passive objects.

The refiguration of nature as a subject in Hawaiian literature is intrinsically tied to an epistemological concept in Hawaiian culture known as *mana*, which can be understood as a force present in every entity (Becket and Singer 25–27). Native Hawaiians believe that every being, whether biotic or abiotic, possesses *mana*, albeit in varying amounts. Places formed by natural phenomena like cracks in the earth, caves, volcanic craters, or frozen lava are regarded as areas with substantial *mana*, and thus viewed as sacred or hallowed. As David and Wilson states,

So-called “power” locations were those where the carving of a petroglyph appears to have been a means of gaining *mana* (spiritual power) or conferring a blessing. Usually associated with openings in the earth (caves, cracks, or collapsed lava tubes), these locales may be considered as a connection to the underworld and its residing spirits. (81)

This agency of matters, articulated by Iovino and Oppermann (77), further underscores the inherent agency within all entities, emphasizing that the narrative of the world encompasses not just human life but also the vital materiality of all living beings. It further acknowledges the experiences of non-human entities, illustrating that they actively shape the unfolding story of our interconnected existence. Nature is reconceptualized, not as an object of observation or interpretation, but as an active agent in its own right.

Personification is a literary technique employed by Hawaiian authors to convincingly convey the holistic interconnectedness of entities through emotional connectedness (Moore 22). This personification of natural elements originated in the polytheistic beliefs of the Hawaiian people, where each deity symbolizes a specific natural force. *Kānaka* articulates their emotional and spiritual connection to the environment by attributing human-like

traits to aspects of nature. In the Hawaiian worldview, deities, as personifications of nature, inhabit both the spiritual and physical realms, coexisting with humans. This is an avenue for telling personal stories, shared cultural memory and societal ties (Dewi and Indriyanto 688). Within the imaginative realms manifested by Hawaiian authors, natural forces take on human-like forms and interact directly with other characters, affirming the concept of *kino lau* (many bodies) in Hawaiian tradition. This belief holds that the Hawaiian deities exist both in the spiritual realm and the tangible world, as Trask posits:

the cosmos, like the natural world, was a universe of familial relations. And human beings were but one constituent link in the larger family. Thus, gods had human and animal forms, and human ancestors inhabited different physical forms after death. (18)

The analysis of selected Hawaiian literature reveals that personification predominantly centers around a female figure, *Pele* as the volcano goddess. This female personification articulates women and nature as active, agentic entities, unlike the Western perspective, which often positions them as parallel passive objects. Swanson expresses that “the image of female deities was celebrated as an example of the closeness of the female to nature and as an ecological symbol of women’s empowerment (255).” *Pele* is believed to be the spirit responsible for volcanic eruptions and lava flows in the Hawaiian Islands, particularly in Mount *Kilauea* and other volcanoes (Mitchell 74). Indigenous Hawaiians perceive the blazing tongues of fire and the billowing clouds of volcanic smoke as manifestations of *Pele* in the tangible world (Lafrance 3). *Pele* is not only regarded as a deity (*Akua*) but also as an ancestor (*kupuna*), specifically, a grandmother (*tutu*) within the Hawaiian kinship system. This phenomenon underscores the Hawaiian belief that their reverence for the personification of nature is rooted in familial connections. *Pele* is believed to be the elder of the *Kānaka* extended family (*ohana*), representing a holistic and inseparable unity.

Pele has great significance in Hawaiian culture, representing all the phenomena related to volcanoes—the magma, steam, ash, acid rain. Her primary form is the lava, not necessarily that she is a female, human person. But the image of her function is creation, which happens to be a very feminine image. Hawaiians call her *Tutu Pele*, using the word for a grandparent, because deities are more ancient than the *Kānaka* are. (Jones 3)

3. *Pele*’s Personification: Refiguring Nature in Selected Hawaiian Literature

In this subsection, the study argues that the personification of natural forces, exemplified by the goddess *Pele* and family *aumakua*, represents the refiguration of the relationship between humans and nature in alignment with the *Kānaka* perspective. The

representation of *Pele* in Hawaiian literature symbolizes the rejection of the exploitation of sacred places in the Hawaiian Islands. Concerning aumakua, the argument focuses on the storyline related to the names given in dreams by family aumakua, known as *na inoa*, as a rejection of the imposition of biblical characters on the people of Hawaii. This highlights these narratives' cultural and ecological significance in redefining humanity's connection with the natural world.

Pele's personification in Hawaiian literature can be found in the works of both white (*haole*) and *Kānaka* authors, with disparities in her portrayal, reflecting the cultural and narrative distinctions between these ethnic perspectives. Indigenous authors such as Kiana Davenport, employ *Pele's* personification as symbols of resistance against the exploitative actions of the American military in sacred Hawaiian locations (*wahi pana*). In this context, the representation of *Pele* in indigenous Hawaiian novels is intrinsically tied to the political aspirations of the *Kānaka* to regain autonomy and sovereignty under American domination. The eruptions and pyroclastic flows on the Big Island of Hawaii symbolize *Pele's* anger at the seizure of Native Hawaiians sacred places, such as graves and places of worship. Conversely, her portrayal in *haole* works does not carry such political overtones.

In James Michener's novel *Hawaii* (1959), the representation of the goddess *Pele* as a personification of volcanic forces, as discussed earlier, is depicted as a woman adorned in a silk robe. Her appearance is imagined through conversation with a Hawaiian chief (*ali'i*) named Kelolo and is portrayed as a sign of an impending volcanic eruption.

they met, for the last time on earth, the silent, delicate form of Pele, keeper of the volcanoes, dressed in silken robes, with strange glasslike hair standing out in the night breeze. She paused dramatically, raised her left hand and pointed south, directly through the Keala-i-kahiki Channel and onto Keala-i-kahiki Point, and she stood thus for some minutes as if commanding Kelolo with her fiery yet consoling eyes. (Michener 340)

In the prior passage, *Pele* is represented as the embodiment of volcanic forces taking on the form of a woman. *Hawaii* presents *Pele* as the "keeper of the volcanoes," a portrayal intrinsically tied to the prevalence of volcanic phenomena in the Hawaiian Islands. Through *Pele's* interaction with a Hawaiian chief, Michener underscores the paramount importance of genealogy in Hawaiian tradition. A chief, tracing their lineage back to the divine union of *Papa* and *Wakea*, is believed to possess a more profound connection to the natural world due to their abundance of *mana* (K. Silva 86). *Pele* serves as the guardian of the Hawaiian people, particularly in the context of volcanic eruptions, underscoring her cultural significance and pivotal role in safeguarding the populace from volcanic calamities.

Hawaii presents a conflict between Hawaii and the West regarding the personification of nature in the form of the goddess *Pele*, epitomized by the rejection of white

people's character regarding *Pele's* existence. This perspective is rooted in the Western positivistic epistemology, which assumes everything can be scientifically explained (Pretty et al. 7–9). Abner Hale, a missionary from New England, underscores the Western skepticism toward native Hawaiian beliefs as mere superstition. Hale's rejection of the existence of *Pele* as the ruler of volcanoes is evident in the quote, "The island stories of *Pele* were nonsense, volcanoes were the result of natural forces whose eruption could almost be predicted scientifically (Michener 407)." When Western science fails to predict when eruptions will occur or to halt the devastating pyroclastic flows that engulf settlements, Michener depicts the success of the chiefess, Noelani, in calming *Pele's* volcanic wrath:

she was a daughter of Pele, one in whose family the very being of the goddess had resided, and now, returning to the suzerainty of the fire goddess, Noelani planted her feet before the on-surging lava and decided that here she would stand and if need be, die. Holding the sacred rock of Pele aloft, she cried, "Pele! Great goddess! You are destroying the town of those who love you! I pray you to halt! (408)

Prior narration affirms the Hawaiian cosmological perspective on the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world, exemplified through the narrative. Within the hierarchical structure of ancient Hawaii, the lineage of chieftains was blessed with an abundance of *mana*, symbolizing a closer connection to nature. Through his narration, Michener asserts how nature remains the dominant force in the relationship between humans and non-humans, essentially portraying it as a subject. This sentiment is evident in the phrase "returning to the suzerainty of the fire goddess," affirming nature's agency and humans' dependence on natural forces. Michener's portrayal underlines his efforts to reconfigure the relationship between humans and nature through the personification of *Pele*. This representation challenges Western anthropocentrism and provides an alternative environmental imagination of natural forces.

The representation of volcanic forces through *Pele's* personification is also evident in Kiana Davenport's *Shark Dialogues* (1995). While Michener envisions the encounter with *Pele* as a warning of impending disasters, Davenport describes the manifestation of natural forces, mainly volcanoes, in the form of *Pele*. The billowing hot smoke emanating from the Kilauea crater is depicted as a sign that *Pele* resides on Mount *Kilauea*, and her fury could lead to a volcanic eruption at any moment:

strong taint of sulfur in the air, and wisps of steam rising from cracked earth, a reminder that the volcanoes were alive, that Pele was seething, gathering subterranean forces. (Davenport 125)

Davenport's depiction alludes to the native Hawaiian belief in volcanoes as living entities and the existence of *Pele*, who safeguards these volcanic landscapes, evident in the phrase "a reminder that the volcanoes were alive." Natural signs such as the scent of sulfur and smoke from the craters signify the presence or manifestation of the volcanic goddess within the living environment. Western influences and colonial discourse viewed nature as passive and exploitable, a perspective challenged in Davenport's *Shark Dialogues*. *Pele*'s representation as a female figure further critiques Western perspectives that often exoticize and sensualize the Hawaiian landscape due to its tropical climate (Indriyanto 82–83). Depicting *Pele* as a raging fire empowers both nature and women as active entities with their agency in the Hawaiian context.

Davenport represents volcanic eruptions through *Pele*'s personification as a symbol of nature's wrath against the ongoing American military presence in Hawaii. Her narrative places volcanic eruptions on the island of Hawai'i as they coincide with the American military's seizure of sacred lands around the Kilauea volcano. This event is depicted in the following passage:

news came that, on the Big Island, the U.S. Army had turned the Ka'u Desert near Kilauea Crater into a training ground. Tanks crunched across volcano beds, graves of ancient warriors were obliterated by machine guns and mortar firing. There were rumblings from *Pele*. Flames shot from her fire pit at night. (Davenport 88)

In Davenport's narrative, she draws parallels between the volcanic eruptions at Kilauea and the intrusion of the American military, which resulted in the desecration of sacred Hawaiian lands. The eruption of Kilauea symbolizes *Pele*'s wrath in response to the confiscation of these holy sites on the Big Island of Hawai'i for American military purposes. It underscores the familial bond between the indigenous Hawaiians and the natural forces, personified through *Pele*'s portrayal. Inglis explores how all Hawaiians have to *mālama 'āina* (care for the land) and, in return, the 'āina will *mālama* the Hawaiians (11). In this context, Davenport contextualizes how volcanic eruptions serve to represent *Pele*'s anger toward the encroachments of foreign forces in Hawaiians' *wahi pana*.

This section contextualizes how *Pele*'s representation within Hawaiian literature reconfigures nature as an active subject. Similar with Michener's *Hawaii*, *Shark Dialogues* positions nature as a dynamic and conscious entity, challenging Western conceptions that instrumentalize nature as a passive object. Differently, Davenport, as a *Kānaka* author, situates her representation as a form of critique toward American militarism and empowering indigenous agency. The subsequent part focuses more on the personification of nature in the form of *'aumakua*.

4. Environmental Imagination of ‘*aumakua* in Selected Hawaiian Literature

Apart from the representation of *Pele*, the personification of nature in Hawaiian literature can also be observed through the depiction of ancestral spirits, known as ‘*aumakua*. Pukui and Elbert (32) define ‘*aumakua* as ancestral spirits revered in the forms of animals, plants, rocks, and clouds. Unlike the collective beliefs in Hawaiian deities, ‘*aumakua* is a more private/specific communal belief since each family worships its specific ‘*aumakua*. As previously discussed, the representation of ‘*aumakua* aims to emphasize the holistic connection of the *Kānaka* with their environment. This belief is based on the notion that deceased family members persist in their presence as spirit animals in the surroundings.

In *Moloka'i* (2004), Alan Brennert envisions the presence of ‘*aumakua* as a site of contestation between Hawaii and the West regarding the ancestral practice of naming. The existence of ‘*aumakua* is seen through Rachel, a *Kānaka* character, as her ancestors impart a traditional Hawaiian name, *inoa po*, in a dream. Rachel, originally given a biblical name, is symbolically bestowed with the Hawaiian title *Aouli*:

the sky above us was blue forever, and I looked up at it and thought: Aouli. ‘Blue vault of heaven.’ It just came into my head: “Aouli.” To the puzzled children, he explained, “A ‘night name’—a name found in a dream. It comes from the next world, and once the name is spoken, it must be bestowed on the child. (Brennert 33)

The above quote refers to Hawaii’s belief in the significance of naming to preserve history, tradition, and genealogy for younger generations. Brennert’s narrative positions the arrival of white settlers and the naming policies based on biblical figures as disrupting this Hawaiian tradition. This conflict is reflected through the character of Dorothy, Rachel’s mother, a devout Christian who views all aspects of Hawaiian culture as heretical:

The old ways, the old language. She wanted all our children to have Christian names, to celebrate Jehovah.” Dorothy pointed out, defensively, “It’s the law. The king decreed that every child have a Christian name! (Brennert 39)

The success of colonial discourse manifests through the use of biblical names as symbols of Western modernity over the original names bestowed by ‘*aumakua*. Dorothy’s rejection of Hawaiian cultural traditions is evident in her use of the terms “old ways” and “old language”. These derogative phrases emphasize how Hawaiian customs and the Hawaiian language are viewed as irrelevant compared to Western culture and Christianity. The characterization of paganism and the stigma attached to ancient beliefs contribute to the abandonment of native Hawaiian traditions, exemplified through the naming bestowed by ‘*aumakua*.

Moloka'i affirms the native Hawaiian belief regarding 'aumakua, indicating that these 'aumakua are believed to exist in two realms: the spiritual and the tangible world, both of which persist on the small island of Moloka'i. Similar to the depictions of Hawaiian gods and goddesses believed to have various physical forms (*kino lau*), 'aumakua also exist in these dual realms. The novel illustrates how 'aumakua, besides being believed to manifest in the dreams of family members, also take the form of spirit animals in the real world:

Our 'aumakua often look after us here on earth. Some take the form of sharks, and if a descendant is drowning in the sea, the shark may offer up its fin to pull them to shore. Other spirits become owls, fish, lizards, or whatever permits them to watch over their family. "There is an old prayer: "Aumakua of the night, watch over your offspring, enfold them in the belt of light. (Brennert 139)

Brennert's exposition underscores the native Hawaiian belief that deceased family members remain near the *ohana* in different forms. He describes how 'aumakua are believed to take on the forms of sharks, owls, fish in the ocean, and other animals. Brennert articulates the indigenous Hawaiians belief that 'aumakua, appearing in the form of animals, will assist the *Kānaka* in times of trouble. The portrayal of 'aumakua actively participating in the narrative demonstrates how *Moloka'i* reconfigures nature as an active subject.

Representations of 'aumakua as a personification of nature are also addressed by O.A. Bushnell in the novel *Ka'a'awa* (1972). The character of Hiram Nihoa, a *Kānaka*, affirms the native Hawaiian belief in the existence of 'aumakua and deities within various entities. Nihoa's character is depicted as an individual who believes in the presence of spirits in the surroundings, as evident in the following quotation:

to this visible tribute, I added a brief prayer, asking the protection of all the gods, great and small, and most especially of the flying fish, my family's totem spirit. (Bushnell 119)

The narrative underscores the dual aspects of pantheism in Hawaiian culture, which are integral to their spiritual and cultural worldview. There is the collective belief in deities, the gods and goddesses, who collectively represent a vast array of natural forces, celestial bodies, and aspects of the environment. On the other hand, the individual belief in 'aumakua reflects a deeply personal and familial connection to nature. Each 'aumakua is unique to an individual or family, often as an animal, plant, or even an elemental force like the wind or ocean. *Ka'a'awa* articulates the indigenous Hawaiian belief in spiritual and mystical elements from nature's central role in Hawaiian tradition. The phrase "all the gods, great and small," underscores the Hawaiian people's belief in the existence of *mana*, the inherent power within every entity, forming a holistic unity.

The portrayal of *‘aumakua* emphasizes the significance of naming and the obstacles posed by the arrival of Western influences in preserving this tradition. In line with Brennert’s interpretation of *inoa po*, the name bestowed by *‘aumakua* in dreams, Bushnell illustrates the vital role of names in preserving history, especially in the context of genealogy. In *Ka’a’awa*, this narrative is depicted in the following passage: “It was the boy’s now, the *mana* of his line, given from his ancestor to him, for him to keep as long as he should live” (Bushnell 127). As a society that passes down history orally, names play a crucial role in Hawaiian genealogy. As found by Pukui, Harertig & Lee “the most precious personal possession in ancient Hawaii was each man’s most personal possession, his name (94).” Names are considered a primary means of preserving Hawaii’s inhabitants’ history, traditions, and genealogical records.

Bushnell highlights that the belief in the importance of names in the context of historical heritage began to erode with the arrival of white settlers and the Christian religion. One illustration of the influence of Western culture on Hawaiian naming is the regulation that mandated the bestowal of a biblical name upon a newborn baby (Green and Beckwith 233). Hiram Nihoa himself is named “Hiram,” a reference to Biblical figure. Bushnell argues that, unlike names given by *‘aumakua*, which carry meaning and serve as a means of passing down history, names following Western culture do not possess specific significance.

the chief of the missionary preachers at that time was called Hiram Bingham. Being a smart man by then, I took his name and pleased her and him. But, to tell you the truth, I do not know what it means. These foreign names, I have learned, have no meanings: they are just strange noises, even to foreigners. Would you believe it? (Bushnell 140)

Unlike the naming of *inoa po* by the family *‘aumakua*, which symbolizes the preservation of tradition and genealogy, Biblical names do not carry their meanings. As highlighted earlier, names are vital in safeguarding Hawaiian traditions, especially within an oral culture. In contrast, Biblical names are deemed meaningless as an imported cultural element.

5. Preserving Traditions: The Enduring Cultural Practices of Native Hawaiians

The articulation of native Hawaiian beliefs regarding the personification of nature, whether in the form of deities or *‘aumakua*, is vividly depicted in Hawaiian literature. Hawaiian authors’ imaginative works underscore nature’s active role and significance in the narratives they present. The portrayal of nature as both human and spirit animals, as reflected in the depictions of the goddess *Pele* and the various forms of *‘aumakua*, signifies a holistic unity between humans and the environment. In contrast to the Western

division of humans and non-humans into separate realms, Hawaiian polytheistic beliefs in literature highlight the profound connection between native Hawaiians and the surrounding natural world. As Herman summarizes, the thoughts of the *Kānaka* emphasize the holistic relationship between deities (*akua*), humans, and *‘aumakua*:

Gods become nature, and humans become demigods, which in turn become nature. The circle between divinity, humanity, and nature is complete, and their boundaries are permeable. (1999, 82)

The native Hawaiians' belief in the existence of gods, goddesses, and *‘aumakua* as embodiments of nature continues to thrive in the modern era. Particularly in regions prone to natural disasters, like near volcanoes, the goddess *Pele* remains a prominent figure of worship among the *Kānaka* community. Acts of reverence and devotion towards *Pele* are prevalent on the Big Island of Hawai'i, especially in areas such as Puna and Ka'u, home to several active volcanoes (Becket and Singer 175; Kawai'ae'a et al. 12; Kodama-Nishimoto et al. 142). This enduring belief in the presence of *Pele* as the guardian of volcanoes on the Big Island has been well-documented, as revealed in Leathers' dissertation (2014), which examined the perceptions of residents living in the vicinity of Mount Kilauea. The research findings from Leathers concluded that out of 257 respondents, 167 of them, or approximately 65%, believed in the existence of *Pele* as the ruler of the volcanoes (88–92). This exposition underscores the persistence of polytheistic beliefs among the native Hawaiians and manifests their profound respect for the natural world.

Similar to their polytheistic beliefs regarding gods and goddesses, the belief in *‘aumakua* as a marker of individual spirituality continues to be embraced by native Hawaiians in the contemporary era. Cordova asserts that "*aumakua* remains worshipped, not merely a relic of a bygone era; it is a present deity in Hawaiian belief (15)." The persistence of *‘aumakua* belief as a form of honoring departed ancestors is closely intertwined with the acculturation of Christianity, which is the predominant religion in Hawai'i today. Kane argues that Christian doctrine, emphasizing God as the Father, and the commandment to "honor your father and mother, (2)" is an area of acculturation between Western teachings and the family values of Polynesian communities. The enduring belief in *‘aumakua* is documented by Silva (2019) in her dissertation, which examined a community in the Wai'anae Valley on the eastern side of O'ahu. Silva discovered the continuity of rituals through prayers (*pule*) offered to *‘aumakua* seeking protection for the community from various calamities.

It is said that a *pule* (prayer) was offered to the spirit and *‘aumakua* (gods) in each of the four directions before and after being on the *‘āina*, so the people were blessed in turn, and their crops were safeguarded both from natural disaster and wild boars. Even today, we continue with our *pule* to our spirit and *‘aumakua* before we step into the *lo 'i kalo* and

other cultivations. We deeply respect the land and kalo because we know it is then that we are blessed with abundant food. (63–64)

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, analysis of selected Hawaiian literature contextualizes the intricate interplay between culture and nature within the Native Hawaiian epistemology. Throughout the study of literary works by both native and non-native authors, a consistent theme emerges: the profound connection between humans and the environment, framed through the lens of traditional Hawaiian cosmology. This framework personifies nature, embodying the close emotional connection manifested through the narratives of Hawaiian literature. Nature is personified as an active character in the description, where the concept of *kino lau* manifests in both the metaphysical realm and worldly form. This alternative environmental imagination enriches our understanding of the human/non-human discourse. Moreover, it also underscores the resilience of Native Hawaiian cultural practices despite historical and contemporary challenges like colonization and modernization.

Hawaiian literature reimagines nature as an active subject, challenging Western anthropocentrism by highlighting the interconnectedness between humans and the more-than-human world. Within these narratives, authors' environmental imagination blurs the rigid boundaries that typically separate humanity from the natural world, emphasizing fluidity and coexistence. This reinterpretation aligns with Hawaiian cultural and spiritual traditions, where gods, goddesses, and *'aumakua* embody diverse aspects of the environment. In conclusion, the environmental imagination of Hawaiian authors posits one avenue to reconceptualize humanity's position within the broader ecosystems.

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