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Case, Emalani

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Caught (and Brought) in the Currents: Narratives of Convergence, Destruction, and Creation at Kamilo Beach

EMALANI CASE, Victoria University

Full disclosure: Before 2018, I had never been to Kamilo Beach. In fact, quite embarrassingly, I had never heard of it. I did not know of its twisting currents (the word *milo* in Hawaiian means to twist, curl, or whirl) or of stories of people who once used those currents to send messages to their loved ones. I did not know of Kamilo as a place where Hawai'i could be touched by the rest of the world, where logs washed ashore could be used for building canoes, or where the bodies of those lost at sea could find one final landing place. To be honest, though I would like to claim otherwise, my journey to Kamilo did not begin as a historical or cultural search for stories caught and twisted in currents. It did not even begin as a desire to learn more about the island of my birth. Rather, my arrival at this particular stretch of sand and sea was incited by a growing, worldwide campaign against one of the most constant and persistent migrators of our contemporary worlds and waters, a migrator who has now monopolized the use of those winding currents: plastic.

Kamilo has been unaffectionately referred to as “Plastic Beach,” and in some instances as “Trash Beach,” and has even featured in headlines from the last few years as “one of the dirtiest places in the world.”¹ Despite some misguided assumptions, it is not that residents of Hawai'i Island go to Kamilo and intentionally leave millions of pounds of trash on the beach each year. In fact, it is not a frequently visited destination. If you have ever been there, or ever decide to visit, you will quickly learn that access to Kamilo (which is located in Ka'ū, the southernmost district of the island) is difficult, and as a result, limited. It requires high-clearance, four-wheel drive vehicles as well as careful maneuvering on and around lava rock, sand, dirt, and coastal vegetation, including many *milo* trees that share their name with the beach. While there are people

who do access Kamilo for camping, fishing, or other recreational activities, and while some of them may leave garbage behind, most of the trash on the beach comes from the ocean, and most of that trash, an estimated ninety percent, is plastic.² The famed waters of Kamilo do what they have always done: They send things caught in the currents, things from all over the world, ashore.



Figure 1. Kamilo Beach (all photos by the author).

The discomfort I felt in *not* knowing about a place on my own island—and having to be made aware of its existence through media sources based outside of Hawai‘i—served as the impetus for this article and the concerns it will address. With that said, I must make clear that I do not expect myself, or anyone for that matter, to know every piece of a beach, a coastline, an island, an archipelago, or even the oceanic spaces in between. In fact, to assume that someone can ever really “know” a place is to also assume that it is unchanging. Therefore, I prefer to accept the “final unknowability” of spaces and to view them as “infinite,” not just in regards to geography but in terms of the many layers of meaning, history, and genealogy held (and constantly being created) in their sands, soils, and currents.³ As Édouard Glissant reminds us, there is constant movement in the world, constant circularity, and, in fluid spaces like Kamilo, we consent to “this rhythm of the world ... without being able to

measure or control its course.”⁴ Thus, it would better to give in to the flux and to see what it can teach us rather than attempt to confine or completely understand it.⁵

This article will therefore explore what emerged from my consideration of Kamilo Beach. Central to my discussion will be the discomfort I experienced in *not* knowing about Kamilo and how this was a matter of (in)visibility, or of how my physical, cultural, and intellectual access to this particular place was limited (and in some cases, restricted) by the various ways the beach has been framed. The unease and embarrassment I felt in not knowing Kamilo inspired me to eventually visit it in 2018, taking my mind and body to the shoreline. Among the many lessons learned in my observations of and interactions with the beach, I have chosen to focus on a few key ideas that I feel will contribute to wider discussions about (in)visibility and accessibility, about colonial framings of oceanic and island areas—not ignoring them as negative spaces around continents, but regarding them as positive spaces of meaning and consequence—and finally, about the convergences (both destructive and productive) of places and perspectives that we must confront in our work, and more importantly, in our collective hopes for the planet.

The (In)Accessibility and (In)Visibility of Kamilo

My arrival at Kamilo was anything but linear. In fact, it was as rough and jarring as the winding road that must be traveled to get there: full of bumps, leans, and the constant threat of breakdown (both of the truck and of my own emotions). When I first stepped onto the shore, I was immediately overwhelmed. I bent down and picked up a handful of sand mixed with plastic debris and quickly realized the depth of the problem, and more so, the many layers of mental, physical, and spiritual “garbage” that I would have to sift through. Upon leaving, I realized that Kamilo is far more than “Plastic Beach.” It is far more than the world’s example of what can happen (and what has happened) as a result of plastic pollution. It is more than a cautionary tale. In fact, these framings have confined Kamilo to a single narrative, one that has not only flattened its textured and complex history, but that has also isolated it, far from view and far from critical consideration. Kamilo is a storied place, one with pasts, presents, and futures that intertwine with, but are not dependent upon, plastics. It is a place imbued its own mana, a place of convergence, destruction, *and* creation.⁶ This article, therefore, is my attempt to recover that knowing, and more so, to learn from the shifting stories being told *in* and *by* the currents, from what gets caught in the waters, and from what eventually gets brought ashore.

At the center of this discussion is an exploration of how and why certain island and oceanic spaces, like Kamilo, are made visible or invisible for particular reasons, at particular times. In the context of Kamilo, such strategic framing can result in what Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens refer to as “negative hallucination” or “a hallucination that does not involve perceiving something that is *not* present, but rather a hallucination that involves *the nonperception* of something that is present.”⁷

Kamilo is very much present but is either deliberately hidden or only presented in ways that render the deeper histories of the place invisible. This work, therefore, is part of the necessary process of exposing negative hallucinations, or “invisible presence,” so that we can finally see what is there, and furthermore, be confronted by the stories being told in and by those spaces.⁸



Figure 2.
Plastics.

Kamilo Beach provides us with a unique opportunity to not only question our not knowing, but to also reflect upon stories, to interrogate the primacy of the narratives that are attached to place, and further, to consider how they can act as catalysts for change in their reflection of our values as human beings. Kamilo is an example of what can surface when we take time to pay attention to our oceanic

spaces, recognizing them as active places of meaning. The sea, according to Michelle Huang, is “always heaving things up and hurling them back ... [and] resists its role as the passive repository for all that humans think we have ‘tossed overboard or left behind.’”⁹ The currents at Kamilo, for example, do not easily accommodate the “prevailing ethics of waste,” which are “disposability, distance, and denial.”¹⁰

In conventional understandings, waste is what is “thrown away” but Kamilo reminds us that there is no “away.” Instead, there is only what can perhaps be understood as another ethic of waste: deferral. When plastic trash, for example, is disposed of, it is distanced and rendered invisible. When something is invisible, it can be denied; it can cease to be something we once owned or used and can disappear into the collective material waste of society. The problem with such garbage, however, and in particular, with plastic trash, is that it never truly disappears.¹¹ Disposing of waste, therefore, is really just a process of deferral, or of pushing the problem to another place and putting off the inevitability of having to deal with it. Kamilo, however, does not let us get away with such deferral. It brings the problem to the shore, and in the process, forces us to confront its many layers of (in)visibility.

A few weeks before I was able to make my way to Kamilo, I was invited to speak to a group of middle school students on Hawai'i Island, aged 11 to 14 years old, about plastic pollution. Unsurprisingly, when asked if any of them had heard of Kamilo, not one raised their hand. It was not merely a matter of some geographic distance (most of the students coming from the northernmost district of the island) but also one of accessibility to the issue.¹² Their knowledge of the impacts of plastic pollution was ultimately hampered by a widespread acceptance (both taught and adopted) of convenience and disposability, and further, of unequal access to information.

Unless you are privy to conversations about the global need to put an end to plastic pollution, you may not be exposed to those places that are most affected by it. Furthermore, if those coastlines that have become collection sites for humanity's destructive habits are out of sight, or are strategically kept out of focus, then the draw to care about them, let alone know about them, is severely diminished. (This is further complicated by the hypervisibility of plastic in our daily lives. Its ubiquity, in other words, makes the sight of plastic trash unremarkable.) Finally, if people are already marginalized, oppressed, or disadvantaged, their sense of moral obligation to something or some place that is seemingly detached from their immediate survival needs is threatened. For those who may come from lower-income or single-parent households, or any other type of living situation where fast food, convenience, and cheap bulk (and usually heavily packaged) products become essentials for “making ends meet,” discussions about plastic straws, bags, utensils, or containers may seem like a privilege, one only afforded to those who can choose to live differently.

The students I spoke to were representative of these many overlapping and intersecting layers of physical, intellectual, and psychological distance. Generally speaking, these students are not only products of today's wasteful society, a society in which single-use plastics, or products that are essentially made to be thrown

“away,” are epidemic, but they are also being exposed to popular media that either trivializes pollution and other related concerns like climate change¹³—making the real impacts seem “far off” or “far away,” like Kamilo itself—or that completely bombards them with desensitizing messages of doom with the result that many have been left feeling as if they are too small to help.¹⁴ Thus, these children are carriers of notions of limitedness and dependency, common island attitudes previously observed by Epeli Hau’ofa.¹⁵

Simultaneously and quite significantly, however, they are also the bearers of continental-like perspectives that frame their islands as being bigger and/or somehow “safe” by association with colonial powers. In other words, despite being part of the archipelagic Americas—living in Hawai’i on islands illegally occupied by the US government—being raised to identify as “American” sometimes leads people to adopt the attitudes of those living in continental USA, particularly in regards to feelings of superiority that come with geographic size. In Hawai’i, I have interacted with many people who feel distanced or “away” from the more immediate impacts of environmental destruction currently being experienced by other (usually smaller) islands in the Pacific and across the globe. Thus, the colonial proximity of Hawai’i to the United States combined with the physical distance makes for a conflicting (and, I would argue, destructive) view of the world, one in which feelings of inferiority and imagined superiority exist in the same space, or one in which young students can believe both that their individual actions cannot make a difference, and at the same time, that there is no urgency to care. Seeing Kamilo, or recognizing its presence and truly acknowledging it, could potentially challenge and change this.

Unfortunately for many, Kamilo has been, and still is, rendered invisible. When I visited the beach myself, however, I learned that this was not always the case. The hidden eyesore of Hawai’i—the one that is now difficult to access physically and psychologically—was once famed for the way it interacted with the world. Residents of the area knew that it could bring to shore gifts, tools, lessons, or even warnings from other places and peoples. Thus, before being covered in plastic, it was a popular beachcombing site and was recognized for what got caught and brought to the land.

A Hawaiian proverb tells of a man from Puna who once used those currents to send a message to his beloved. “Ka wahine alualu pū hala o Kamilo,” or “the hala-pursuing woman of Kamilo,” recounts the story of a woman named Kapua who once left her husband and traveled to the district of Ka’ū.¹⁶ Missing her, Kapua’s husband wrapped a malo (loincloth) that she had made for him around a cluster of hala (pandanus) and placed it in the ocean at Halaaniani in Puna, knowing that it would get caught in the currents and be brought to Kamilo. While out fishing, a group of women found the bundle and when it was unwrapped Kapua recognized the malo and knew it was her husband begging her to return home. While this story prompts us to remember Kamilo’s openness, it also encourages us to look beyond the dominant narratives, finding other points of access through which we can reacquaint ourselves with our island and oceanic spaces so that we can come to truly love and appreciate

them. Perhaps if Kamilo has been rendered invisible, we need to approach it from another angle, even if coming to it from the sea through hala-scented stories.

(Re)Framing and (Re)Centering Island and Oceanic Spaces

Despite the difficulties that we must confront in accessing Kamilo, the beach itself has never been shut off to the world. The currents did not, and do not, discriminate. Anything caught in the twisting waters are brought in. Kamilo therefore reminds us of the absurdity of colonial boundaries drawn across oceanic spaces. While being part of the Hawaiian Island archipelago, and being occupied by the United States, there is nothing that governments can do to cut off the shore from other oceans and other landmasses, thus challenging the place of humans in the organization of land and ocean spaces. One only need sift through a small amount of plastic trash on the beach to see that items come from across the globe, showcasing different brands and languages. There is also no restriction on age, size, color, or utility. In fact, because Kamilo is also somewhat close to what has famously become known as “The Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” or “the largest of the five offshore plastic accumulation zones in the world’s oceans,” it has become a landing place for anything caught in and churned out of the gyre, or the system of rotating currents that has created the “patch.”¹⁷



Figure 3. Debris from all over the world.

The patch, which is actually the combination of two accumulation zones in the Pacific, the Western Garbage Patch and the Eastern Garbage Patch, is an “international dump site.”¹⁸ It collects garbage from all over the world. Despite its name, however, it is not a heaping pile of trash that is readily visible. Instead, it has been characterized as a thick soup of debris that floats just beneath the surface of the water. Alice Te Punga Somerville theorized that the patch could be used as a metaphor for understanding the “long-standing, diverse, irreversible, and invisible/suffocating relationship between the United States, the idea of America, and the Pacific.”¹⁹ For continental Americans, the patch is conveniently “out of sight.” While it is not easily visible in the ocean either, Somerville argues that the patch can be viewed archipelagically, not as individual and separate pieces of trash floating in the sea, but as a networked system of parts that are connected and disconnected by the ocean.²⁰ As such, she argues, the patch reminds us, literally and metaphorically, “that tiny particles still have heft, and even a tiny fragment can tell us not only about itself but about broader configurations.”²¹ The patch teaches us, for instance, that no matter how small a piece of plastic, it is still very much connected to larger systems of power and influence, and further, still has impact, even in granular form.²² The same, metaphorically, can be said for islands.

Kamilo’s fame as a place of twisting currents reminds us of broader and far-reaching connections and configurations. The knowledge that people maintained of its openness contradicts notions of islands as being fixed and isolated. Further, it challenges any assumption that islanders were not (and are not) linked to life beyond their shores. Prior to Western contact, for instance, Hawaiians maintained knowledge of other places and peoples that, although distanced, were always central in their articulations of self and identity. A proverb that exemplifies this is “aia ke ola i Kahiki,” or “life is in Kahiki.”²³ As I have explored in earlier work, this single term, Kahiki, contains our “ancestral memories of migration”:

When islanders traveled to different parts of the Pacific region, they maintained knowledge of their homelands. Although the names of these homelands differ throughout the Pacific, the concept is the same: islanders knew that their life in a particular place, a particular group of islands, was dependent on other places and peoples that although out of sight were never completely out of memory. After generations, however, the specificity of these “homelands” was blurred, and one name [Kahiki] came to represent the genealogical connection that people shared with other places in the Pacific.²⁴

When foreigners from the West eventually found their way to the islands, Kahiki became the term used to refer to their countries as well. Thus, the proverb reconfirms

that distance never mattered; life—whether in the form of materials, tools, or ideas, or even in the form of harsh warnings that, if heeded, could be pathways to life—came from Kahiki.

As I moved along the beach, picking up large scraps of plastic (and later sitting and sifting through mounds of microplastics), I began to rethink Kamilo and wondered whether it would be productive to reframe the beach as a landing place for Kahiki. Of course, “life” coming from Kahiki is not always pleasant and/or immediately useful.²⁵ What appears on the shore can be, as Glissant reminds us, quite chaotic and can come from suffering and struggle.²⁶ The ocean collapsing onto land, he argues, can “make one vast beginning.”²⁷ This beginning, however, is sometimes marked first by death. When I went to Kamilo, I witnessed this. What the currents now move are reminders of how we have chosen to live our lives: superior to nature, out of touch with the sacredness of the environment, neglecting what Sherri Mitchell refers to as “the fullness of our interrelatedness,” or knowing “the world as a unified whole.”²⁸ What is being brought in the currents, therefore, are opportunities for new beginnings—for imagining and working towards a postplastic future—that must first come from recognizing the “death,” or the struggle and chaos we are inflicting on our planet. The currents and what they carry prompt us to remember ourselves *in relation*, to recenter the ancestral knowing that there is no separation between us and the earth we live upon, and finally, to *act* upon that knowing.

Remembering connection, though, means that we must recognize and acknowledge these landing places. To do so requires first confronting dominant frames, and where productive, dismantling them. Interestingly, while Kamilo is known for its openness, it is this same inability to be closed off that has kept it from being subject (albeit indirectly) to particular colonial framings, or as Aileen Moreton-Robinson explains, to certain markers of “white possession” that often influence what is considered worthy of being seen. For many indigenous peoples around the world, “white possession is not unmarked, unnamed, or invisible; it is hypervisible.”²⁹ In Hawai‘i, colonial power is seen in every state building, every sign, every flagpole, every hotel, and every military base, as each signifies that our land is under the control of others. Such possession is easier to recognize in metropolitan areas, or in those places considered valuable or useful by the colonial state. Beaches, as spaces of crossing, were some of the first places where the converging (and often clashing) of Indigenous and foreign desires, agendas, and ideologies, had the most impact.³⁰ In Hawai‘i, as Haunani-Kay Trask writes:

The American relationship of people to land is that of exploiter to exploited. Beautiful areas, once sacred to my people, are now expensive resorts; shorelines where net fishing, seaweed gathering, and crabbing occurred are more and more the exclusive domain of recreational activities such as sunbathing, windsurfing, and jet skiing. Now, even access to beaches near

hotels is strictly regulated or denied to the local public altogether.³¹

Kamilo, however, is not one of those beaches that has been claimed by the tourist industry and framed as the “appropriate” backdrop for a vacationer’s experience of “paradise.” Kamilo’s geographic distance from a metropolitan center combined with its openness to the rest of the world has left it “marked” in a different way. Rather than being scarred by resorts or condominiums, by restaurants or lū‘au grounds, Kamilo has been marked by absence: marked as undesirable, or as not fitting the image that the government wants to “sell.”

Despite the many problems being faced in Hawai‘i—including (but certainly not limited to) the devastatingly high cost of living, the growing rate of homelessness, the continued desecration of sacred sites, the pollution of lands and waters by US military training exercises,³² along with the disproportionate number of Native Hawaiians in prisons, underachieving in schools, and overrepresenting in rates of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease—the islands are still perceived as an “escape.” The rhetoric of paradise is strong. Tourists come to Hawai‘i to get away from their lives, to relax, and to experience moments of bliss. For visitors, then, “Hawai‘i is *theirs*: to use, to take, and above all, to fantasize about long after the experience.”³³ The success of the invented “get away,” however, relies upon disconnection and disengagement from the realities of Hawai‘i.

Kamilo, with its strong and storied currents, disrupts the fantasy. Rather than being an escape, it is a constant reminder of connection, and more importantly, of the realities of the world. It reminds us that there is no escape, that islands and oceans are always open, that what we do in one place (despite distance) can and will impact another place, and that our neglect for the environment can come back and hit us with force, washing up on our shores, whether we are ready for it or not. Kamilo, therefore, cannot be made visible, at least not in the colonizer’s framing of Hawai‘i. It cannot be claimed by tourism or even marked as a colonial possession, in other words, because such “claiming” would require much more accountability and responsibility and not all are ready for that.³⁴ Thus, reframing Kamilo—making it visible for the stories and lessons it can teach us—is essential.

Destructive and Productive Convergences on the Shore

While visiting Kamilo, I had to confront my own responsibilities to place and had to turn inward to critically reflect upon whether or not I was carrying them out or conveniently ignoring them, perhaps using my distance—geographic and otherwise—and dominant framings as an excuse. Going to Kamilo, and taking my mind and body there to listen to its stories, made responsibility impossible to ignore. When our trucks first pulled up to the beach, we parked next to what appeared to be a pile of rocks. Upon closer inspection, however, I learned that they were a new material called

“plastiglomerates,” or what one *HuffPost* article calls “the new and horrible way humans are leaving their mark on the planet.”³⁵

Plastiglomerates are essentially conglomerations of natural materials—like lava rock or wood—and plastic. Thus, they are “a hybrid that crosses categories and challenges measurements as either nature or as pollution.”³⁶ Plastiglomerates are created when plastic trash is exposed to heat, causing it to melt and fuse with other materials. As was explained to me, the plastiglomerates at Kamilo were likely created in bonfires, when people (whether recklessly or with good intentions) burned plastic debris.³⁷



Figure 4. Plastiglomerates.

This does not mean, however, that plastiglomerates are easily preventable, or that education alone is the solution: “Although campfire burning is responsible for the plastiglomerate on Kamilo Beach, it is conceivable that the global extent of plastic debris could lead to similar deposits where lava flows, forest fires, and extreme temperatures occur.”³⁸ Thus, although plastiglomerates are relatively new, having first been discovered in 2006, and although writing about them only started increasing in the decade following their discovery, the potential for more of them to begin showing up all over the world is great. While considered unsightly, however, they are also

intriguing and have been used to incite conversation. Artists like Kelly Jazvac, for instance, have exhibited plastiglomerates from Kamilo as “both artistic objects and scientific artifacts, and as neither wholly industrial nor natural elements.”³⁹ As curios they make visible the fact that “Earth and our impact upon it are irrevocably intertwined.”⁴⁰ Plastiglomerates are visible signs of a merging (or perhaps, clashing) of worlds. They are signs of unnatural and forced partnerships. One of the plastiglomerates I examined contained everything from ropes, bottle caps, and plastic tubes, to even a plastic slipper. This was in addition, of course, to countless bits of unidentifiable plastics broken off of bigger items (or broken up over time). What struck me about the melding of these items, and the way that they were now embedded in stone, was how something so natural, like lava rock, was now being forced to coexist with something so unnatural, like plastic. When I went to Kamilo, however, I challenged myself to see beyond the single, dominant narrative of destruction. Caught on rocks just off the shore I noticed a few logs, each visibly burnt and partially charred by fire. As was eventually explained to me, these logs were washed up from the district of Puna where, since May 3, 2018, a steady flow of lava had been exploding and pouring out of Kīlauea volcano’s east rift zone.⁴¹ When I pushed myself to look beyond the trash, I also noticed what looked like bits of charcoal hidden between the many layers of colorful plastic. These also came from Puna, where new land was still being produced every day. Thus, on one shore were remnants of both destruction and creation: timely reminders for all of humanity—not just those living on islands, but for everyone.

At the time, residents in Puna had been evacuating their homes, recognizing and having extreme reverence for the power of nature. When the eruptions began, many expressed their love and respect for Pele, the deity who lives at the volcano, understanding the area of Puna as her domain.⁴² Their stories have been recounted by both local and US-based news outlets, teaching all those open to reading and learning a bit more about the spiritual connection between humans, the earth, and the forces of creation.⁴³ When I stood at Kamilo, I realized that at the same time that Hawai‘i Island’s landmass is being enlarged and expanded in Puna—once again challenging notions of islands as being fixed and unchanging—it is also being increased at Kamilo, albeit in a way that reflects not only creation but destruction as well. Embedded into lava rock, or *pele*, as it is known in the Hawaiian language, are items that we have made and must now take responsibility for. Plastiglomerates are contributing to the build-up of our islands, literally expanding the size of rocks. However, from a cultural perspective, this “growing” can also be seen as desecration, forcing upon Pele/*pele* a piece of trash that contaminates and poisons. This “merging,” therefore, can be reframed as a kind of penetration or abuse that we, as the creators and consumers of plastic, are forcing upon the Earth and the deities who dwell here with us.

Figure 5.
Plastics and
burnt logs
from Puna.



Plastiglomerates are therefore representative of how clashing ideologies cannot coexist peacefully. Plastics, a result of humanity’s dissatisfaction with natural materials that either deteriorate or break down easily, come from the need for convenience and from prioritizing our needs over those of the planet. Plastics are, in other words, an attempt to sidestep the natural processes of decay, decomposition, or rot, and to outsmart them. While perhaps created with good intentions, or to make our lives easier, we must now be held accountable for what we are contributing to the planet. Though plastic items—particularly single-use plastics like bags, straws, and utensils—are essentially made to be used and quickly disposed of, Andrea Westermann explains that, ironically, “it is the miniature timescale of disposable

plastic—the temporal shallowness of a large portion of our daily interaction with plastic—that creates the thickness of its archaeological accumulation and record in the present.”⁴⁴ What is accumulated, “caught,” and now made visible on shorelines and in stones, are the product of our views of the world, and more importantly, what we believe to be our place in it. Addressing the problem at Kamilo, therefore, requires a shift in perspective, and more than that, a willingness to act upon that shift. A possible perspective to embrace in this shift, one coming from Hawai‘i, is aloha ‘āina. Although the phrase can be translated as “love of the land,” it truly expresses an unwavering commitment and an active and constant loyalty to carrying out our responsibilities, which includes taking care of all of our sources of sustenance, starting with the physical ground we stand upon as well as the ocean that shapes it. Aloha “is an active verb, not just a sentiment.”⁴⁵ It is a way of being in the world, of living *with* and caring for the environment, the land, the ocean, the sky, and all of the creatures that dwell in these spaces. Further, it acknowledges when we have done wrong and when we have caused destruction. Aloha ‘āina is not about being dominant, controlling our natural resources, or living beyond the ability of the planet to house and care for us. It is an ideology that does not, and cannot, merge with notions of conquest. As Mitchell explains, “[c]onquest is the vehicle that drives colonization” and as this “dominator mind-set” has had centuries to infiltrate our societies, communities, and our minds and bodies, we must now tap into older stories that teach us how to be *with* the world rather than trying to conquer it.⁴⁶ With that said, I must be clear that I do not advocate romanticism or a “return” to a bygone era. We cannot reverse time and go back to a precolonization, preplastic, preconglomeration time, nor should we want to. What I do suggest, therefore, is that we imagine and work towards a postplastic future.⁴⁷

Such imagining can be facilitated by aloha ‘āina, or by what others in various parts of the world may just call a fierce and ferocious love of place. Such a love, Naomi Klein argues, cannot be extinguished or denied.⁴⁸ In order to be motivated by this kind of love and dedication, however, we must first reestablish connections to place and these connections must come from truly seeing places for the complex, interconnected, entangled, complicated, and often chaotic stories they tell. Kathleen Dean Moore writes that love of place first comes from this kind of attentiveness: “[A]ttentiveness can lead to wonder, and wonder can lead to love, and love can lead to protective action.”⁴⁹

Thus, I propose that we take pause to consider the real impact that our work can have on the planet, and more so, on the ways that we can make space for thinking critically about the kinds of contributions we want to make to the world. Kamilo reminds us that we have a responsibility not only to take direct action to protect Earth, but as scholars and researchers in our respective fields, to hear the stories begging to be heard in the spaces we work and to tell them. We must listen to the places that we speak about, the places that we often profess to “know,” and must be willing to see both what is immediately visible (or made to be visible) and what is hidden. We must know, for instance, both about the plastic and the hala-scented memories so that we

can reinvigorate our love of places. To do so, we must be willing to be uncomfortable. We must be willing to challenge colonial framings, to make the invisible visible, to question accessibility, and to position ourselves in the middle of convergences, both productive and destructive, to see what is waiting to be brought to shore. We must be conduits of change. Even if plastic production stopped tomorrow, we would still be left with millions of pounds of trash already caught in the currents, waiting to be churned out. Our job, therefore, must then be to encourage (re)engagement with place so that we can ensure that our future story, one of hope and change, is not buried by an incessant wave of trash.



Figure 6. Beyond the plastic.

Notes

My visit to Kamilo was made possible by the Hawai'i Wildlife Fund and their regular volunteer visits to the beach.

¹ Carla Herreria, "The Islands Of Hawaii Hold One Of The Dirtiest Places In The World | HuffPost," *HuffPost*, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/kamilo-beach-hawaii-dirtiest-beach-america_us_58e99a38e4b05413bfe3792d; and Meghan Werft, "A Beach in

Hawaii Has Become One of the Dirtiest Place on Earth,” *Global Citizen*, May 1, 2017.
<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/plastic-beach-hawaii/>.

² Michelle N. Huang, “Ecologies of Entanglement in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20, no. 1 (2017): 95.

³ Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens, “Introduction: Archipelagic American Studies, Decontinentalizing the Study of American Culture,” in *Archipelagic American Studies*, ed. Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 23.

⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 124.

⁵ Albert Wendt shares this view of the Pacific, stating that “only the imagination in free flight can hope—if not to contain her—to grasp some of her [the Pacific’s] shape, plumage, and pain” (“Towards a New Oceania,” *Seaweeds and Constructions* 7 [1983]: 72).

⁶ In Hawaiian, mana has many definitions. Here it is being used to speak about power and energy. In this article, all Hawaiian words will appear in regular font, supporting a movement to resist italicizing and thereby marking Indigenous languages as “foreign.”

⁷ Roberts and Stephens, “Introduction: Archipelagic American Studies,” 9–10.

⁸ Alice Te Punga Somerville, “The Great Pacific Garbage Patch as Metaphor: The (American) Pacific You Can’t See,” in *Archipelagic American Studies*, ed. Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 321.

⁹ Huang, “Ecologies of Entanglement in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” 102–03.

¹⁰ Westermann, “A Technofossil of the Anthropocene: Sliding Up and Down Temporal Scales with Plastic,” 12.

¹¹ An important distinction to be made about plastics is that they do not break down. They break up, meaning that most of all plastic produced in history is still on the planet in some form, even if in tiny pieces.

¹² Most of the students came from the district of Kohala. The talk I presented was in Kawaihae, located roughly ninety-seven miles north of Kamilo.

¹³ US president Donald Trump has been quite open about his views on climate change, at times referring to it as a “hoax” and at other times making inappropriate jokes calling for some “good old global warming” (McGowan and Walters, “Trump’s Call for Some ‘good old global warming’ Ridiculed by Climate Experts”).

¹⁴ Thomas King has argued that the overuse of phrases and concepts like “Mother Earth” and “freedom” (and our subsequent overexposure to them) can lead to a loss of “power or import” (*The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*, 17).

¹⁵ Epeli Hau'ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 149.

¹⁶ Mary Kawena Pūku'i, *Ōlelo No'eau: Hawaiian Proverbs & Poetical Sayings* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1983), 177.

¹⁷ The Ocean Cleanup. “The Great Pacific Garbage Patch”
<http://www.theoceancleanup.com>.

¹⁸ Dautel, “Transoceanic Trash: International and United States Strategies for the Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” 182–83, 201.

¹⁹ Somerville, “The Great Pacific Garbage Patch as Metaphor: The (American) Pacific You Can't See,” 321.

²⁰ Somerville, “The Great Pacific Garbage Patch as Metaphor: The (American) Pacific You Can't See,” 323.

²¹ Somerville, “The Great Pacific Garbage Patch as Metaphor: The (American) Pacific You Can't See,” 332.

²² Susan Dautel writes about biomagnification, or the fact that levels of toxicity increase in each successive link in the food chain. This means that even in invisible form, plastic toxins can still contaminate the food we consume, thereby impacting our health (“Transoceanic Trash: International and United States Strategies for the Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” 187).

²³ Pūku'i, *Ōlelo No'eau: Hawaiian Proverbs & Poetical Sayings*, 9.

²⁴ Case, “I Kahiki Ke Ola, in Kahiki There Is Life: Ancestral Memories and Migrations in the New Pacific,” (PhD Thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2015) vi.

²⁵ According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), microplastics are “small plastic pieces less than five millimeters long which can be harmful to our ocean and aquatic life.” They come from larger pieces of plastic that have broken down over time. Thus, given the amount of plastic being produced every day, the potential for more and more microplastics making their way into the land and ocean is overwhelming. (“What Are Microplastics?” (<https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/microplastics.html>)).

²⁶ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 121–22.

²⁷ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.

²⁸ Sherri Mitchell, *Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-Based Change*, (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2018) 10.

²⁹ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xiii.

³⁰ I deliberately use the word “foreign” because Haunani Kay-Trask uses that term a lot in her scholarship. Therefore, I am using it to align with her work and the work of other scholars from Hawai‘i.

³¹ Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai‘i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1993), 143.

³² At the time of writing, RIMPAC 2018 was underway in Hawai‘i (running from June 27, 2018 to August 2, 2018). RIMPAC, or Rim of the Pacific multinational war exercises, are held every other year in Hawai‘i.

³³ Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai‘i*, 136.

³⁴ Thankfully, there are organizations like Hawai‘i Wildlife Fund that are trying to do their part and are also helping to raise awareness. Visit <http://www.wildhawaii.org/> for more information.

³⁵ Herreria, “Plastiglomerate.”

³⁶ Jazvac and Corcoran, “Plastiglomerate,” 276.

³⁷ Although burning plastic is dangerous and toxic to the environment, some believe that incineration is a means of getting rid of it. Thus, while some of the burning of plastics may have been done recklessly, it is believed that some of the plastiglomerates were created by people who, although misinformed, were trying to help.

³⁸ Patricia Corcoran, Charles Moore, and Kelly Jazvac, “An Anthropogenic Marker Horizon in the Future Rock Record,” *GSA Today*, 24, no. 6 (2013): 6–7.

³⁹ Quoted in Weiyi Chang, “Kelly Jazvac,” *International Contemporary Art*, 134 (2017): 41.

⁴⁰ Jazvac and Corcoran, “Plastiglomerate,” 277.

⁴¹ According to a July 24, 2018 news report, the lava flowing from the new fissures added “at least 760 acres of new land” to Hawai‘i Island. It was also reported that the current eruptions in lower Puna could continue for months or even years.”

⁴² In Hawai‘i, Pele is the famed goddess of the volcano. The lava that she creates is also called pele. The lava is therefore sacred and should be treated as such.

⁴³ Dillon Ancheta and Lacy Deniz, “Kilauea’s Eruption Comes with a Cultural Connection to Pele,” *Hawaii News Now* (2018); Simon Romero and Tamir Kalifa, “Madame Pele,

Hawaii's Goddess of Volcanoes, Awes Those Living in Lava's Path," *The New York Times* (2018).

⁴⁴ Andrea Westermann, "A Technofossil of the Anthropocene: Sliding Up and Down Temporal Scales with Plastic," *Power and Time*, ed. Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Natasha Wheatley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming), 18.

⁴⁵ Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, *The Seeds We Planted: Portraits of a Native Hawaiian Charter School* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 32.

⁴⁶ Mitchell, *Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-Based Change*, 111.

⁴⁷ Small steps have been made toward this future. In 2013, Hawai'i was the first state to pass plastic bag reduction laws for all counties.

⁴⁸ Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*, (London: Penguin Books, 2014) 342.

⁴⁹ Kathleen Dean Moore, *Great Tide Rising: Towards Clarity and Moral Courage in a Time of Planetary Change* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2016), 79.

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