

From witness to relative: epistemic contest in James A. Michener's *Hawai'i* and Kiana Davenport's *Shark Dialogues*

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Abstract: This article argues that the epistemological conflict between the West's instrumentalizing traditions and the cosmology of the Kānaka Maoli/Native Hawaiian is starkly represented in an ongoing struggle over the nature of volcanic landscapes. The clearest examples of this contest appear in the commodification of craters as pleasurable places (an implementation of the classic workshop myth documented by Pliny the Younger), within a larger context that treats the volcano as matter outside the human relational network. These narratives are opposed to the ways of knowing that regard volcanism as the physical manifestation of Pele, an ancestor (*kupuna*) and thus an integral part of the Kānaka Maoli's ontological kinship structure. Here the relational network is one that connects humans to the narrative of the sacred space (*wahi pana*) and to the *kapu* (taboo) customary law that regulates it. The two novels examined, *Hawai'i* (1959) by James A. Michener and *Shark Dialogues* (1995) by Kiana Davenport, offer different scenarios for the resolution of judgment about (and in) the volcanic eruptions: one aligns the materiality of lava and geothermal energy with a non-dominating, non-human agency; the other demonstrates the collapse of the 19th-century missionary rationalism and the 20th-century militarism in the face of the land's physical power. In both instances, violations of sacred boundaries of the volcanic landscapes lead to ethical consequences for everyone. The readings also demonstrate the efficacy of combining literary criticism with environmental ethics to expose the failure of the colonial perspective that reduced the earth to a mere extractive commodity.

Keywords: *Hawaiian Literature; volcanic epistemology; geomythology; Pele; settler colonialism.*



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Introduction

Volcanic eruptions reveal a fundamental epistemological clash over humans' place in relation to the earth. On the one hand, people treat underground dynamics purely as objects of observation from a distance. On the other hand, people experience geological processes as living entities that demand genealogical recognition and ethical responsibility. Western thought has historically kept a physical and conceptual distance from active volcanoes, frequently framing them as abstract spectacles rather than integrated environments (Hamilton 12-14; Pyle 15-22). Modern science's taxonomy, for example, still retains the label of the eruption 'Plinian.' The term refers directly to Pliny the Younger's observation report documenting the eruption of Vesuvius from across the Gulf of Naples (Sigurdsson 35). This attitude of an outside observer institutionalized a way of viewing that lasted for centuries. The bowels of the earth were reduced to the workshops of gods in mythology, field specimens of the Enlightenment, and visual commodities for nineteenth-century travelers. In each phase, humans position themselves as distant spectators who treat the land as mere dead matter.

The cosmology of Kānaka Maoli departs from a different ontological order. In the Hawaiian Islands, the landscape is understood through the *wahi pana* ("sacred place") system, where physical space and historical narratives form each other. Volcanic activity marked Pele's sovereign physical presence as *kupuna* ("elder") in the extended family tree (Trask 5). This knowledge is maintained through the oral tradition of *mo'olelo* ("stories") and is ordered by the *kapu* ("forbidden/taboo") customary legal system (Kuykendall 29). For Native Hawaiians, interacting with volcanic soils fulfils kinship obligations, not separate aesthetic observations.

This ontological divergence forms a central tension in modern Hawaiian¹ literature. In James A. Michener's *Hawai'i* and Kiana Davenport's *Shark Dialogues*, volcanic eruptions become sites of contestation over authority and territorial belonging. Writing from an external vantage, Michener dramatizes the collapse of nineteenth-century missionary rationalism when genealogical invocations arrest advancing lava. Yet his narrative reliance on omniscient focalization and feudal terminology ("suzerainty") risks reproducing the very imperial gaze the narrative critiques. Davenport extends this critique into the late twentieth century, examining how the mechanisms of "militourism" (Teaiwa 254) seek to repurpose sacred volcanic environments into commercial assets (Buell 235).

To trace these dynamics without conflating literary representation with lived Indigenous ontology, this article tracks volcanic agency across four distinct analytical registers: cosmological, where Pele's volcanic presence constitutes an ontological reality in Kānaka Maoli thought; narrative, where the novels position lava and subterranean

¹ We use "Hawaiian novels" in the geographic sense – novels set in Hawai'i and engaging with its culture and history – while acknowledging that the term is contested. For Kānaka Maoli scholars, "Hawaiian literature" properly refers only to literature by Native Hawaiians, genealogically defined (Trask; Ho'omanawanui, "This Land" 2008). For others, it encompasses all literature produced in or about the islands, regardless of author ethnicity (Boström 111-2; Luangphinit 220).

forces as active agents within the plot; ethical, where eruptive crises enforce ancestral accountability; and legal-political, where *kapu* operates as customary jurisprudence governing spatial boundaries.

By evaluating *Hawai'i* and *Shark Dialogues* across these intersecting planes, this article examines how both texts stage the failure of colonial, military, and capitalist frameworks to subjugate the earth. Ultimately, these narrative encounters destabilize Western paradigms of property and dominion across the Pacific, especially Hawai'i, reframing the volcanic landscape not as exploitable real estate, but as genealogical kin asserting enduring presence.

The volcano in the Western tradition

A central epistemic habit governs the Western engagement with subterranean dynamics: the exteriorization of the volcano. Across classical myth, early empirical reporting, and Enlightenment aesthetics, the Western volcano is constructed consistently as an object seen from outside – the forge-god's workshop, the survivor's distant specimen, or the tourist's consumable spectacle – rather than an embodied genealogical relation. Environmental philosopher Val Plumwood terms this conceptual estrangement “hyperseparation”: a dualistic logic that opposes nature and culture so categorically that it systematically denies nonhuman entities agency, interiority, and moral standing (54). Mythological framing, empirical surveillance, and aesthetic commodification operate as three vocabularies for this hyperseparating impulse, each confining the volcanic landform to the far side of a boundary only the human observer may cross.

In Greco-Roman mythology, the volcano is primarily conceptualized as an industrial workshop. As Jenny March notes, Hephaestus was believed to keep forge workshops “in all places where the earth gave forth smoke and fire, and especially beneath the volcanic Mt. Etna,” where the Cyclopes labored under his direction, causing the mountain to resound “with the noise of their hammering” (89). The eruption is not the mountain's own expressive utterance, but the audible byproduct of divine male labor escaping subterranean containment. While the mythic geography varies across classical texts – from Lemnos in Homer's *Odyssey* (8.267 ff.) to the Aeolian cliffs in Virgil's *Aeneid* (8.416-22) – the forge remains intensely gendered, defined by craft, instrumentation, and mechanical utility rather than generative or maternal vitality. Furthermore, the volcano signifies divine exile and shame; cast down from Olympus, Hephaestus lands on Lemnos “with little breath left in him” (*Iliad* 1.590-4). In this mythological framework, the volcano acts merely as an instrument of divine punishment. The mountain possesses no interior will or expressive subjectivity; it remains physical context rather than narrative agent.

Similarly, classical interpretations of the sulfurous Campi Flegrei reduced subterranean activity to the traces of heroic or divine combat (Connors 124-6). Strabo records that the region smelled of sulfur, fire, and thermal springs because “the wounds of the giants felled by lightning bring forth these streams of fire and water” (*Geography* 5.4.6). Here again, the environment functions only as a battleground for transcendent

actors. The volcano remains a static theater for external conflict rather than an autonomous subject.

This externalizing gaze shifted from mythic projection to empirical surveillance in the letters of Pliny the Younger (6.16 and 6.20 to Tacitus; Radice 425-47), which provide the earliest surviving extended eyewitness account of an eruption in the Western canon (Foss 14). Pliny's correspondence establishes a fundamental spatial asymmetry. While his uncle, Pliny the Elder, set sail toward Vesuvius on a rescue mission and succumbed at Stabiae, the younger Pliny remained at Misenum. Observing the eruption from across the Gulf of Naples, the nephew survived to document the umbrella pine cloud from a detached, secure vantage point. The uncle who engaged the eruptive zone perished; the nephew who maintained spatial distance survived to establish narrative authority. Pliny the Younger's epistemic authority is thus predicated on spectatorship rather than direct vulnerability.

Far from remaining a historical literary artifact, this spectator model became institutionalized within modern earth science. In the late nineteenth century, Giuseppe Mercalli formalized the designation "Plinian" to classify explosive eruptions marked by sustained gas and tephra columns, a taxonomy subsequently popularized globally (Sigurdsson 89). Through this historical lineage, an early imperial eyewitness account became geological nomenclature, encoding a detached, observational epistemology into contemporary volcanological science.

If Pliny established the descriptive conventions of volcanic observation, eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophy supplied its artistic rationale. In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke theorized the "sublime" as a sensation of terror experienced from a position of safety, defining it as an awe accessible only to a spectator immune to immediate peril (53, 59). During the late eighteenth century, the Grand Tour around Mount Vesuvius institutionalized this aesthetic principle, transforming catastrophic volcanic displays into commercial commodities equipped with designated viewing stations and local guides (Brewer 145-82).

This leisure economy subsequently shaped Victorian representations of the Pacific. When travel writers encountered Kīlauea in the late nineteenth century, they framed Hawaiian volcanism through metropolitan referents. Isabella Bird described the caldera as "a huge burning of a metropolis" (119; qtd. in Pyle 87), while Constance Gordon Cumming similarly invoked urban conflagrations to conceptualize the active lava lake (1: 223; qtd. in Pyle 91). As Pyle observes, these authors mobilized metropolitan disasters to render Kīlauea legible to European audiences, "imposing a Vesuvian template on a volcano whose Indigenous significance was elsewhere altogether" (94). This comparative rhetoric reduced the volcano to an imperial commodity and aesthetic spectacle, erasing its ontological status as a living *kūpuna* within Kānaka Maoli tradition.

Across classical myth, Plinian reportage, and the Romantic sublime, the volcano is systematically denied standing across all four analytical registers. Myth denies the landform cosmological interiority, reducing it to an artisan god's workshop; classical correspondence denies it narrative subjectivity, rendering it an object of retrospective human witness; aesthetic philosophy and the Vesuvius tourist trade deny it ethical claims,

treating it as an object of visual consumption; and imperial legal regimes refuse it the territorial standing of customary jurisprudence. Hyperseparation is thus complete: the volcano is codified as specimen, spectacle, or background, but never kin. It is against this systematic exclusion that Kānaka Maoli cosmology establishes Pele – not as a regional variant of the volcano-as-object, but as its structural antithesis, possessing agency within the very registers the Western tradition withholds.

The volcano as Kin: Hawaiian epistemology and the Pele tradition

Where the Western tradition withholds cosmological, narrative, ethical, and legal standing from volcanic landforms, Kānaka Maoli epistemology integrates all four through the relational ontology of *wahi pana* (“storied place”). Within this framework, geography is never reduced to passive physical coordinates. Rather, speaking topographies function as sacred locales where customary prohibitions (*kapu*) and ancestral lineages converge (Ioane 7). Toponyms such as Halema‘uma‘u encode enduring ecological and genealogical relationships, linking the physical crater directly to the ‘*ama‘u* (“tree fern”). As ku‘ualoha ho‘omanawanui emphasizes, rock and land are genealogically inseparable from the volcano deity: “In the Hawaiian world, *pohaku* (“rocks”) are created, in part, from the volcano goddess Pele, whose very name means lava. This is another way Kānaka Maoli connect genealogically to the ‘*aina* and demonstrate a relationship with it” (“This land” 128). Reciting the eruption within oral traditions of *mo‘olelo* (“historical narrative”) and *oli* (“chant”) constitutes an act of genealogical recognition, positioning the active volcano as a living ancestor (*kūpuna*).

In Hawaiian cosmology, the divine is not detached from the physical environment, but manifests directly through it. *Kino lau*, as Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert define it, denotes “the many forms [that might be] taken by a supernatural body,” derived from *kino* (“form or embodiment”) and *lau* (“many, numerous”) (44). Under this ontology, Pele is simultaneously the woman who walks the land, the molten lava that consumes it, and the crater that shelters her. In Donald D. Kilolani Mitchell’s formulation, Pele’s anthropomorphic form may appear to her followers as a young maiden or a weathered elder; her visible spirit form manifests as an incandescent flame or an atmospheric cloud during an eruption; and her destructive physical form is the advancing lava flow accompanied by sulphurous volcanic gases (74). This dynamic does not constitute personification in the Western literary sense – the rhetorical attribution of human characteristics to inanimate matter – but represents an ontological reality in which the volcanic landscape possesses autonomous agency, voice, and genealogical memory. Pele is revered both as *ka wahine ‘ai honua* (“the woman who eats the earth”) and *ka wahine ‘ai pōhaku* (“the woman who eats stone”). Such designations are not decorative metaphors, but genealogical recognitions that embed Pele within the territorial terrain she simultaneously creates and consumes. Furthermore, Pele’s embodiment as female directly contests Western colonial discourses, which have historically exoticized and sexualized the Hawaiian environment under the trope of passive tropical warmth (Indriyanto, “Decolonizing” 82-3).

These gendered dynamics mark a foundational divergence from classical Mediterranean myth. Whereas Greco-Roman tradition frames Hephaestus as an artisan deity who reduces subterranean fire to a mechanized, masculine forge, Pele represents an ontology in which creation and destruction are dialectically inseparable. In the epic *mo'olelo* of Pele and Hi'iaka, the incineration of sacred *'ōhi'a lehua* ("myrtle family") groves demonstrates that territorial devastation and ecological renewal are co-constitutive forces (Emerson 40-2). While Western myth naturalizes technical dominion over inert matter, Pele's eruptions represent genealogical labor: they birth new island landforms, reconfigure living topographies, and establish non-negotiable ethical boundaries across human and more-than-human communities.

Pele's status as *kūpuna* ("ancestor, elder") shapes the relational disposition of the human communities residing within her domain. One approaches her realm with protocol, ceremonial offerings, and an enduring consciousness of kinship. This reciprocal link is articulated with acute material precision in the *hulihia* (Hawaiian song describing volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and storms) chants, which were composed "by professionals who believed in the Deity and understood the natural make-up of our islands" (Kanahele and Wise 7). As preserved in oral tradition:

*Kulapa mai ka ulu wela, o mai ke ahi.
Ke'ahi aku la no e nalo kapua'i, e
Kapua'i akua no Pele.
Ke ke'eke'ahi wale la no i ka lani
Ha'ule, u'ina i Polapola.*

The growing heat multiplies, as the fire digs forth.
Stamping out everything to conceal the footprints,
The prints of the Goddess, of Pele.
Treading yonder towards the heavens,
Finally falling, splashing at Borabora. (Kanahele and Wise 85)

By referencing Polapola (Bora Bora) in the Society Islands – the ancestral departure point in Pele's voyage to Hawai'i – the chant links ongoing volcanic upheaval to deep migration history. The chanter does not describe the eruption from an empirical or aesthetic remove. Instead, the performance addresses the living phenomenon directly, interpreting advancing lava flows as the literal footprints (*kapua'i akua*) of an ancestor asserting territorial authority. As ho'omanawanui notes, maintaining *pono* ("balance") requires demonstrating active reverence for the land and ancestral lineages, an ethic systematically encoded across the Pele and Hi'iaka corpus (*Voices of Fire* 6).

This spatial consciousness is further articulated in the *mo'olelo* of Pele's maritime voyage across the archipelago. Moving southeastward from Kaua'i, Pele excavates fire pits along each island, only to have them extinguished by her oceanic sister, the water deity Nāmakaokaha'i, until she establishes her enduring sanctuary at Halema'uma'u on Hawai'i Island, supported by her brother Kamohoali'i (Beckwith 508). This narrative reflects an accurate chronological awareness of the Hawaiian island chain's geological

succession, closely anticipating modern volcanic hotspot theory (Vitaliano; Decker and Decker 4). Rather than functioning merely as allegorical lore, the voyage operates as an Indigenous geological record, preserving geomorphological history through genealogical narrative.

Thus, while the Western intellectual tradition systematically exteriorizes the volcanic landscape – framing it successively as a mythological forge, an object of empirical surveillance, and a commodified tourist spectacle – Hawaiian cosmology understands the volcano as *kūpuna*, an elder relative embedded in an unbroken network of reciprocal obligations. As Haunani-Kay Trask affirms:

My people believed that all living things had spirit and, indeed, consciousness and that gods were many and not singular. Since the land was an ancestor, no living thing could be foreign. The cosmos, like the natural world, was a universe of familial relations. (5)

When nineteenth-century colonial observers and travel writers mapped Vesuvian paradigms onto Kīlauea, they enacted an epistemological erasure, attempting to replace a living kinship matrix with a commodified, spectator-oriented landscape. This clash between Cartesian detachment and relational kinship is precisely what Michener's *Hawaii* and Davenport's *Shark Dialogues* dramatize, staging encounters in which an externalizing colonial gaze confronts an active terrain that refuses objectification and asserts its material presence as kin.

Staging the collision: eruption as epistemic contest in Michener's *Hawaii* and Davenport's *Shark Dialogues*

The preceding sections outlined two divergent orientations toward volcanic phenomena: the detached exteriorization characteristic of the Western tradition and the reciprocal relationality grounded in Kānaka Maoli ancestral kinship. In Michener's *Hawai'i* (1959) and Davenport's *Shark Dialogues* (1995), published roughly three decades apart, these two epistemologies confront one another not as abstract concepts, but as opposing narrative forces embodied by characters whose actions test their limits. Across both novels, the volcano functions far beyond a passive setting or a conventional literary symbol; the eruption serves as the catalytic event through which these epistemologies collide, and the land articulates its own material response. This dynamic extends beyond generalized conceptions of nonhuman activity theorized within “material ecocriticism.” As Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann argue, matter possesses narrative agency, defined as the capacity of nonhuman phenomena to actively shape meaning within “a material ‘mesh’ of meanings, properties, and processes within which human and nonhuman players are locked in networks that provide for undeniable signifying forces” (1–2). In these two novels, however, volcanic agency is not merely diffuse or semiotically distributed; it is purposeful, responsive, and directed.

Michener's opening eruption sequence depicts an encounter with geological upheaval that precedes both organized missionary doctrine and Hawaiian genealogical integration.

Michener portrays the earliest Polynesian voyagers as defenseless before the unmediated ferocity of their new environment:

It was a night of terror, fearful in its strangeness and paralyzing in its power. The men of Havaiki, seeing for the first time the incredible fury their new land could unleash, sat awestruck in their canoe and watched for a long time the cataclysm that had destroyed their home. (Michener 131)

The phrase “paralyzing in its power” reflects Michener’s effort to register the landscape as a formidable subject. Here, the voyagers from Havaiki are positioned as vulnerable observers beneath an overwhelming volcanic outburst. This initial cataclysm forces the voyagers to abandon the main island of Hawai‘i to settle other parts of the archipelago, establishing terrestrial instability as the primordial condition of island life.

This primal encounter gives way to formal scientific rationalization later in the novel. Michener reimagines a historical eruption that threatened the town of Hilo on the slopes of Mauna Loa during the early decades of Western contact. The ensuing confrontation is focalized through the nineteenth-century missionary establishment, which operated as an ideological apparatus of Western expansion through the dual authorities of Christian dogma and natural science. The New England missionary Abner Hale exemplifies this stance, presuming that empirical observation and scientific deduction can anticipate volcanic behavior while dismissing Indigenous traditions: “He believed that volcanoes were the results of natural forces whose eruptions could be predicted and he realized that the island stories of Pele were nonsense” (Michener 407). Within Hale’s framework, the volcano remains an external object designated for calculation and administrative control, stripped of agency or relational connection to human observers.

The epistemic clash sharpens when Noelani, an *ali‘i* (“chieftain”), intervenes to upend this Western detachment. Rather than treating the advancing lava as an inanimate hazard to be calculated or fled, she addresses Pele directly through inherited genealogical bonds. This enactment of Indigenous relationality directly challenges the narrative’s prevailing reliance on external focalization (Genette 180):

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-surgings 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! (Michener 408)

This confrontation demonstrates the ancestral-kinship paradigm. Noelani’s authority does not derive from scientific observation, but from *mana* (“spiritual efficacy”) inherited through her direct ancestral lineage with Pele. Her posture before the incandescent flow is not Western heroic individual defiance, but the realization of *kuleana* (responsibility) rooted in kinship. While Hale observes the landscape from a detached, diagnostic distance, Noelani stands immediately before the advancing front, addressing the volcano as elder kin who listens and responds.

The resulting collapse of Western rationalist certainty is registered through Hale's acute humiliation:

[It] was the worst single blow Abner Hale experienced in Lahaina, for coming so quickly after the defection of Keoki and his sister, it was interpreted as confirming their marriage; while Noelani's demonstrated ability to influence the ancient gods convinced Hawaiians that they still survived, and many began drifting away from the Christian church. (Michener 408)

This episode marks not merely an abstract theological dispute, but the public defeat of Western scientific and religious authority, enacted directly before the Hawaiian community Hale sought to assimilate.

Michener traces the aftermath of this defeat along two divergent narrative axes, both external to Hale's worldview. The secular American onlookers respond to the arrested lava not with spiritual conviction, but with cynical levity, reducing Pele's intervention to a commercial spectacle: "One profane captain kept shouting, 'From here on count me a firm believer in Madame Pele!' Another promised, 'Now if Noelani will only take care of the storms, I'll join her church, too'" (Michener 408). This reaction reflects the aesthetic consumption and tourist gaze examined earlier: even sympathetic Western witnesses neutralize Pele's authority by recasting her power as entertainment rather than an ethical claim on their conduct. Hale, meanwhile, retreats into dogmatic rationalization, growing "obsessed with the lava incident" and "arguing with anyone who would listen: 'The burning rock came so far and stopped. What's so miraculous about that?'" – to which his Hawaiian parishioners pointedly respond, "Ah, but who stopped it?" (Michener 408). Hale's rationalism cannot answer this question. The novel presents this inquiry through Hale's own congregants, leaving the matter open for him yet resolved for the community around him – Michener's sharpest staging of the underlying epistemic divide.

Yet Michener's discourse contains subtle linguistic contradictions that resist an unproblematic reading. Noelani is described as "returning to the suzerainty of the fire goddess" (408). Borrowed from European feudal law, the term suzerainty denotes the dominance of a sovereign lord over a subordinate territory. Even at the narrative's moment of Hawaiian vindication, Michener's descriptive register relies on Western hierarchies of feudal subjugation. This ideological friction is structural: Michener narrates Noelani's relationship with Pele from a position that cannot fully inhabit it. The narration registers what she accomplishes but cannot access how she knows, constrained by an epistemology foreign to its own narrative perspective.

As Genette's framework indicates, external focalization remains Michener's default narrative technique, restricting internal access to Noelani's *mana* and preventing her actions from being fully understood on their own cultural terms. This epistemological distance points to a broader representational impasse. As Manulani Aluli Meyer observes, Hawaiian epistemology unites "body, mind, and spirit," underscoring "the importance of spirituality in knowing" and the "inseparable relationship between humans and nature" (215). The limitation of settler narration lies not in willful misrepresentation, but in its inability to focalize Indigenous epistemology without translating it into external political

and legal idioms. The novel thus affirms Hawaiian cosmological authority in its plot while containing it within foreign grammatical and narrative conventions – a tension that unfolds across the narrative’s language itself.

Hale’s nineteenth-century instrumentalism reappears in Davenport’s *Shark Dialogues* in the institutional practices of the late-twentieth-century state. Where Hale attempted to discipline the volcanic landscape through theological prediction, the modern state seeks to dominate it through military occupation. Teresia Teaiwa defines the institutional alliance between military installations and commercial tourism in the Pacific as “militourism,” wherein “joint fictions of security and paradise” legitimate sustained dispossession (254). The military establishes physical control over the territory, while the tourist apparatus reframes that presence as benign or protective. Davenport illustrates this dynamic in the military conversion of Kīlauea’s Ka‘ū Desert:

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 gun and mortar firing. There were rumblings from Pele. Flames shot from her fire pit at night. (Davenport 88)

The sacred terrain, containing ancestral burials and spiritual power, is appropriated as a tactical firing range through an instrumentalist logic of space.

In Davenport’s narrative, the seismic rumbles and fiery outbursts that follow manifest the earth’s material retaliation against armed desecration – a clear enactment of narrative agency in Iovino and Oppermann’s terms. Militourism relies on the island’s presumed passivity, expecting the land to endure artillery testing while sustaining an idyllic image for holidaymakers. The subsequent eruption shatters this illusion, staging the land’s reclamation of territorial sovereignty against fantasies of human dominion. Furthermore, Davenport’s prose erodes the distinction between the geological volcano and Pele’s spiritual presence. Through the ontological reality of *kino lau*, divine power manifests directly in the physical environment. Sensory details, such as the sharp odor of sulfur and thermal steam issuing from subterranean fractures, serve as material evidence that the volcano is a living organism asserting autonomy from the earth’s depths (Davenport 125).

While Michener locates the crisis of Western authority within the grounds of a colonial church, Davenport situates it within the commercial space of the National Park. Davenport redirects the text’s ecological critique from institutional religion toward consumer capitalism. The destruction of park facilities interrupts the commodification of the Hawaiian landscape for commercial leisure, challenging the capitalist paradigm wherein “land has always been defined predominantly as commodity” (Buell 235):

They were more than a mile out on the lava now, leaving crowds behind. Suddenly, a forest of huge, twisted steel girders loomed against the sky, eerie and forbidding. “The Park’s Visitor Center.” Vanya played her light across the awful skeletons. “Lava flow of ’89 took that. A million dollars. Gone.” They moved on, over a now-buried, but once heavily populated subdivision. (Davenport 432)

As a site built for aesthetic display, the National Park Visitor Center represents the commercial heir to the eighteenth-century tourist sublime – a venue where visitors pay to view an eruption from an insulated distance. Davenport portrays its incineration not as random natural destruction, but as an ethical intervention within the framework of *kapu*, through which the land reclaims territory converted into commercial spectacle. The sovereign *mana* that Hale dismissed as superstition and the military treated as disposable terrain asserts itself against the physical infrastructure of consumerism.

Significantly, Davenport introduces an important analytical dimension that remains underexplored in existing criticism. Indriyanto reads Davenport's volcanic events primarily as symbolic expressions of ecological outrage against the military presence in Hawai'i, interpreting Pele as an embodiment of anti-colonial resistance ("Reimagining" 30). While compelling, this reading overlooks a crucial textual turn that complicates straightforward political binaries. Davenport does not restrict the land's judgment to foreign military and corporate intruders. An archival document within the novel reveals that the volcanic summit was sacred space "not meant to be inhabited, only worshipped from a distance" – a spiritual injunction broken by the ancestors of Kānaka Maoli themselves: "Ancestors broke those sacred laws and devastation came" (Davenport 439). This passage disrupts simple binaries. By showing that past Hawaiian settlement decisions also incurred volcanic retaliation, the narrative shows that relational kinship does not guarantee special exemption. The land imposes strict accountability on anyone who breaches its boundaries, including the ancestral forebears who established the kinship lineage.

This understanding of the volcanic landscape as a sovereign, self-regulating entity is rooted in the customary jurisprudence of *kapu*. Defining *kapu* as an institutional legal order is not an extraneous theoretical metaphor. Historically, *kapu* functioned "to establish and preserve the right relationship between man and this unseen power" (Kuykendall 29), safeguarding cosmic and environmental balance through strict sanctions that applied to spatial violations regardless of lineage (Kame'elehiwa 25). J. Kēhaulani Kauanui's analysis of Hawaiian governance clarifies how colonial regimes flattened Indigenous legal systems by shoehorning them into Western notions of singular property ownership and state jurisdiction (15-18). Complementing this, Kamanamaikalani Beamer demonstrates that nineteenth-century Hawaiian Kingdom leadership did not view customary stewardship and codified law as incompatible; instead, they mobilized state legal instruments to institutionalize ancestral responsibilities to the land (28). Viewed alongside this historical scholarship, Davenport's ancestors who "broke those sacred laws" (439) are judged not by a loose literary convention, but by an integrated system of legal-relational accountability.

Through the physical manifestations of advancing lava, noxious gases, and geothermal heat, both *Hawaii* and *Shark Dialogues* present the landscape as far more than passive scenery. Volcanic eruptions function as nonhuman material agents operating within the jurisprudence of *kapu*, integrating cosmological, narrative, ethical, and legal-political registers (Iovino and Oppermann 1-2). In Davenport's text, volcanic eruptions enforce *kapu*, refusing a utilitarian framework that treats land as vacant, neutral ground. Recognizing Pele as an ancestral *kūpuna* does not offer human actors an exemption from

disaster; within the logic of both novels, it establishes reciprocal obligations binding all who reside within her reach. The primary conflict in this Pacific literature is therefore not merely an epistemological difference in perspective, but a profound confrontation between two opposing systems of obligation to the earth: one based on reciprocal, kinship-bound accountability, and the other on unilateral extraction and imperial immunity.

Conclusion

James A. Michener and Kiana Davenport stage the same epistemic contest from different centuries and different institutional vantage points, and both novels under analysis move through all four registers this article has traced. Cosmologically, Pele is *kupuna* – an ancestral relative rather than an inert landform – in both texts’ own terms. Narratively, both novels construct eruption as response rather than accident: lava halts before Noelani, and Kīlauea stirs against the Army’s occupation, because each text’s plot logic makes the land answer to something. Ethically, both scenes exact a public cost from the parties who ignored that relation – Hale loses his congregation; the Visitor Center loses its million dollars. And legal-politically, as Kauanui’s and Beamer’s accounts of Hawaiian governance make clear, *kapu* is not a metaphor borrowed from Western legal vocabulary to dignify Indigenous belief; it is the customary order Hawaiian leaders themselves codified into law, an order colonial and state frameworks worked to flatten into categories it was never built to hold.

The clearest evidence that this order is a legal-relational structure, and not simply an anti-colonial trope, is the one place in *Shark Dialogues* where it turns inward. Davenport’s ancestors are not spared: “Ancestors broke those sacred laws and devastation came” (439). If *kapu* applied only to American soldiers and tourists, Pele’s eruptions would function as allegory – nature avenging the colonized against the colonizer, a comforting binary this article has resisted throughout. Instead, the novel holds Kānaka Maoli accountable to the same obligation it holds everyone else to. That is the strongest claim either novel makes for treating the volcanic landscape as *kupuna* rather than symbol: not that the land takes sides, but that it does not.

Read together, the two novels do not simply personify the volcano; they stage, across nearly a century of Hawaiian literary history, the same argument advanced by the Hawaiian epistemology this article has traced from the introduction onward – that the land is a relative bound to its people by mutual, unequal, and inescapable obligation. That obligation does not bend to who is asking.

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