



Hawai‘i beyond Tropical Overtourism: Decolonial Perspectives on Jasmin ‘Iolani Hakes’ *Hula*

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Abstract

This paper examines Jasmin ‘Iolani Hakes’ debut novel *Hula* (2023) as a decolonial critique of tropical overtourism, land dispossession, and cultural commodification in Hawai‘i. The study investigates how the novel, which follows a strong heritage of Kānaka Maoli writing, reimagines Native Hawaiian experiences within the colonial matrix of power, and reveals Indigenous strategies of resistance and resilience. The paper examines the ways *Hula* depicts tropical tourism as a continuation of colonial violence, and how it foregrounds Indigenous epistemologies to counter the tourist imaginary of Hawai‘i as tropical “paradise.” It does this through a close textual analysis of *Hula*, cross-referenced with Aníbal Quijano’s (2000) concept of the “coloniality of power,” Walter Mignolo’s (2009) theory of “epistemic disobedience,” and ecocritical insights from Rob Nixon. The findings reveal that the novel portrays tropical tourism as a subtle extension of colonial conquest: erasing Native presence and accelerating environmental degradation. The novel simultaneously demonstrates epistemic disobedience through the preservation of authentic hula (dance form), communal storytelling, and activism against military and corporate encroachments. The study concludes that the novel disrupts the normalizing of tropical tourism by centering Native Hawaiian agency, and reframing Hawai‘i not as a consumable paradise but as a contested homeland where cultural resurgence and sovereignty remain vital.

Keywords: tropical overtourism, epistemic disobedience, decolonial critique, Indigenous resistance, Hawai‘i, Hula, cultural commodification

Introduction: Colonialism, Tourism, and Hula

Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his work *Tristes Tropiques*, expressed his sorrow over the detrimental effects of Western civilization on tropical regions and their Indigenous inhabitants (1974). In modern Hawai'i, the "sad tropics" have manifested as mass tourism and its associated detriments. Tourism in Hawaii started when the U.S. was in charge of the islands, and it still shows signs of that history. Tourism is often seen as a harmless business, but for Indigenous Hawaiians, it is "a colonial imposition," a system that takes over their land, turns their culture into a product, and benefits people from outside the area (Trask, 1999, p. 137). This system has grown to huge sizes over the years. When Hawai'i became a state in 1959, there were more than twice as many residents as tourists. Today, there are six times as many tourists as residents and thirty times as many tourists as Native Hawaiians (Trask, 1999, p. 50). This phenomenon, frequently referred to as "overtourism," signifies not only an economic strategy but also a perpetuation of colonial patterns: a surge of predominantly Western tourists depleting island resources and space, often detrimental to the Indigenous population's welfare.

Contemporary Hawaiian literature frequently serves as a site of decolonial resistance, challenging the sanitized, tropical neocolonial "paradise" narrative constructed by the tourism industry. In her debut novel, *Hula* (2013), Jasmin 'Iolani Hakes talks about overtourism and its effects directly. She tells a tale that mixes personal family stories with the larger history of Hawaii's colonial and tourist exploitation. *Hula* takes place in Hilo, on Hawai'i Island (the "Big Island"), and tells the story of three generations of Native Hawaiian women from the Naupaka family. The novel follows the lives of its characters as they go through important events in Hawaiian history, such as the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893 and its annexation by the U.S., the suppression and revival of Hawaiian culture (especially hula dance) in the middle of the 20th century, the boom in tourism after World War II, and the Native Hawaiian Renaissance of the 1970s. Hakes, who is from Hilo, writes with a deep understanding of the complicated, painful details of what history has done to her beloved island chain (2023, pp. 379-381). The main themes of the book are how colonial rule banned or took over Hawaiian cultural practices like hula, how tourism became the new way for neocolonialism to exploit people, and how Native Hawaiians still fight against cultural erasure and environmental injustice. Hakes writes in her author's note that *Hula* explores a lot of sensitive issues, one of which is the appropriation and commodification of Hawaiian culture, as well as ongoing struggles over land and identity (2023, pp. 379-381).

This paper utilizes decolonial theory as a framework to enhance our comprehension of the novel's critique of tropical tourism and colonialism. Decolonial theory, articulated by scholars such as Walter D. Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and

Achille Mbembe, examines how the legacy of European colonialism endures in present power structures, knowledge systems, and economic relations, overall, an idea referred to as coloniality. A central tenet of decolonial thought is the notion that modernity, encompassing contemporary phenomena such as global tourism, is inextricably linked to coloniality, the enduring “darker side” of modernity that perpetuates racial hierarchies and the exploitation of the Global South [which is more specifically the tropics] by the Global North [of temperate climes] (Mignolo, 2011, p. xiv). Quijano (2000, pp. 536-553) introduced the concept of the coloniality of power, elucidating how colonial-era structures of domination predicated on race, labor, and authority persisted beyond the cessation of formal colonialism, subsequently transforming into a global system of capitalist exploitation. Tropical tourism in previously colonized regions represents an extension of this system: a renewed cycle of extraction and “predation” that sustains the “colonial structuring of economic spaces,” transforming Indigenous lands and cultures into commodities for metropolitan (and now global) consumption. Mbembe (2003, p. 86) characterized the fundamental principle of colonialism as necropolitics, a dominion to determine who survives and who perishes or, more generally, whose environments may be obliterated in pursuit of capitalist gain and gratification. Tourism may not entail overt warfare, yet it frequently manifests a more insidious variant of what Rob Nixon (2011, pp. 45–67) terms “slow violence”: the gradual and covert disintegration of social and ecological structures under the strains of overexploitation, pollution, and cultural homogenization. Maldonado-Torres (2007, pp. 240–263) underscores the coloniality of being, referring to the lived experiences of colonized individuals who persistently encounter dehumanization and violation in their daily lives. He contends that the war against colonized populations becomes normalized during peacetime, as conquest and subjugation are rendered to appear natural. In the context of Hawai‘i, the ongoing influx of tourists and capital can be interpreted as a perpetuation of the “war” against Hawaiian land and life that is now conducted through zoning regulations, real estate transactions, and cultural appropriation instead of traditional weaponry.

This paper interprets *Hula* as a decolonial text that critiques overtourism as a manifestation of neocolonial violence. It looks at four themes: the violence of tourism in tropical areas, the commercialization of hula, environmental injustice, and Indigenous resistance. Through these readings in conjunction with decolonial theory, the research demonstrates how the novel exposes the detrimental effects of tourism while recuperating Native Hawaiian narratives and epistemologies. In the end, the book does what Mignolo (2009) calls “epistemic disobedience” by questioning colonial ways of seeing and asserting Kānaka Maoli points of view.

Tropical Tourism as Neocolonial Violence in *Hula*

Given the neocolonial context of tropical tourism, Indigenous Hawai'iian literature can be read as a counter discourse. As Kristiawan Indriyanto in this work on tropicality, decoloniality, and Indigenous Kānaka literature, argues:

Past and present struggles between American imperial rule and Indigenous interests are palpable in this archipelago, contextualizing the dynamics of displacement, dispossession, and repossession in Hawai'i. *Kānaka* literature arises from the need of Indigenous writers to tell their truth, their own story, instead of having it represented by foreign, white (*haole*) writers. (2023, p. 86)

In this respect, the novel follows a rich Hawaiian literary scene that challenges tropical colonialism and tourism. Kiana Davenport's multigenerational epic *Shark Dialogues* (1994) provides a sweeping critique of how colonialism and tourism intersect to dispossess Native Hawaiians. The novel uses the character of Pono and her granddaughters to illustrate the dilution of bloodlines and the struggle to maintain identity amidst the commodification of culture. The work exposes the militarism nexus, demonstrating how land seized for military bases and luxury resorts alike alienates Native peoples from their *'āina* (land). Davenport depicts Hawai'i as a site of violent historical trauma encompassing leprosy colonies, plantation labor, and the overthrow of the monarchy, all elements that the tourism industry attempts to whitewash. This critique is expanded in her subsequent novels, including *Song of the Exile* (1999), which links the cultural genocide of Native Hawaiians with global histories of displacement and shows how the tourist gaze erases historical trauma. While the work *House of Many Gods* (2006) tackles environmental racism through contrasting the pristine tourist image with the pollution and poverty facing Native communities on the Wai'anae Coast. Complementing this macro-historical approach, Kristiana Kahakauwila's *This Is Paradise* (2013) offers a granular examination of the daily friction between locals and tourists. The title story employs a collective "we" narration from the perspective of housekeeping women, thereby flipping the tourist gaze back onto the visitors themselves. The collection reveals the performative *aloha* required for survival in the service economy, a concept that sociologists term emotional labor, and it starkly delineates the spatial segregation between the resort zones of *Waikīkī* and the working-class realities of ordinary locals. Her recent work, *Clairboyance* (2024), continues this trajectory by validating the complex reality of growing up in modern Hawai'i against simplistic outsider stereotypes. Together, these authors illustrate distinct strategies of literary resistance. Davenport exposes the structural and environmental violence of the tourism industry, while Kahakauwila reveals its psychological and social toll on the local population.

Hakes' *Hula* (2023) is set in Hilo, Hawai'i. It traces the lives of the Naupaka women including Ulu, Hulali, Laka, and Hi'i, across four decades as they navigate the complexities of cultural identity, colonization, and familial duty. The novel is narratively anchored by the collective voice of the Hilo community, a "we" that serves as witness to the family's triumphs and fractures, particularly the rift caused when Laka, a former Miss Aloha Hula dancer, abandons her heritage for a life on Maui, only to return with her daughter, Hi'i, who struggles to find her place in a lineage she has been estranged from. At its heart, the book grapples with the tension between the sacred, resistance-based tradition of hula and its commodification by the tourism industry, examining how cultural trauma and secrets are passed down alongside resilience and art. The Merrie Monarch Festival serves as the novel's cultural spine, depicted not merely as a competition but as a vital act of decolonial resistance and cultural revitalization. Founded in Hilo during a period of economic decline following the devastation of the sugar industry, the festival was established to "lift our chins" and resurrect Hawaiian pride by showcasing hula in its most authentic forms, countering the sanitized versions performed for tourists (Hakes, 2023, p. 41). The festival's crown jewel, the Miss Aloha Hula competition, represents the pinnacle of solo female performance, demanding that a dancer embody not just technical skill but deep genealogical and historical knowledge. The novel illustrates the profound weight of this title through the contrasting experiences of Laka and Hi'i. For Laka, becoming Miss Aloha Hula was a double-edged sword; while her victory was a moment of supreme cultural validation where she felt "a rising tide that filled the space between her and everything else," it also bound her to a legacy she felt suffocated by, leading to her eventual flight (Hakes, 2023, p. 195). Her mother, Hulali, had meticulously chosen Laka's chants to ensure they carried political weight, viewing the competition as a platform to assert Hawaiian sovereignty. Years later, when Hi'i seeks to compete, she is initially passed over for her cousin Leilani, a rejection that fuels her desire to reclaim her birthright. Hi'i's eventual performance of the *Mo'olelo no Kuula* (a chant her great-great-grandmother Ulu performed for King Kalakaua to protest land theft) is a radical act of defiance. Unlike the "soft fluidity" expected of commercial hula, Hi'i's performance is described as sharp and resolute, her hands forming "fists" rather than inviting gestures, transforming the stage into a space of political assertion (Hakes, 2023, p. 253). Through these performances, the festival is shown to be a "battlefield" where the struggle for Hawaiian identity is fought, proving that for the Naupaka women, hula is a "call to action only the truest of Hawaiians could understand" (Hakes, 2023, p. 32). Ultimately, *Hula* is a story about the painful but necessary work of cultural and familial reconciliation. Through the interconnected lives of the Naupaka women, Hakes exposes the "militourism" and colonial forces that have attempted to erase Hawaiian identity, while simultaneously celebrating the enduring power of hula as a vessel for history, resistance, and healing. The novel concludes with the understanding that true sovereignty begins with the reclamation of one's own story, suggesting that the

survival of the Hawaiian people is inextricably linked to the preservation of their sacred arts.

Contemporary tourism in Hawai'i can be characterized by what I regard as a kind of neocolonial manifestation of violence, executed not via overt conflict but through economic hegemony, cultural encroachment, and the marginalization of Indigenous populations. The book starts by talking to the reader in the first-person plural, which sounds like the voice of the Hilo Hawaiian community as a whole, and it is very clear that it is talking to tourists and outsiders. The islanders tell the visitor, "We are not what you think." They say, "To you who come on airplanes, who descend upon us, we are invisible as air" (Hakes, 2023, p. 1). The work shows tourists "descending" on Hawai'i like invaders, not caring about the people who live there. The locals call themselves the *āina*, which means "the land and its parts." They say, "We are not here for you." "We were here before you came, and we will be here when you leave" (Hakes, 2023, p. 1). This defiant statement goes against colonial ideas of ownership and hospitality. It echoes Trask's criticism of Americans who see Hawai'i as theirs "to use, to take, and... to fantasize about" (1999, p. 136). The narrators reaffirm Indigenous presence against erasure by stressing continuity and independence. This shows Maldonado-Torres's "decolonial attitude" because it doesn't look at things from a colonial point of view.

The novel articulates that tourism is a kind of structural violence that gets in the way of community life. A vivid scene shows how a busload of tourists ruined a *lū'au* (traditional Hawaiian party or feast), arranged to celebrate Laka's win. This kind of interruption which used to happen "once, maybe twice a week" but now happens "three, four times a day" (Hakes, 2023, p. 196).

"To the interrupters, Hilo is a rented room. A wreckage of piña colada paper umbrellas, empty water bottles, and sunscreen are left in their wake. We are forced to be the housekeepers of this land our home, to clean up the messes of others. It was almost time for the meeting that night, but we couldn't leave Richardson's until we cleaned trash from the bushes, gathered abandoned boogie boards and forgotten fins, a punctured snorkel half buried in the sand, a pink shovel floating facedown in a tide pool. Only then we could go..." (Hakes, 2023, p. 341)

The quote highlights the unequal burden on locals to maintain their land amid visitors' carelessness. The visitors, who were "all sneakers and sun hats," swarm the gathering "like fog," trampling babies' blankets with their "careless white feet" (Hakes, 2023, p. 196). They call the police when asked to leave and make the Natives look "threatening"

and "unwelcoming." This corresponds with Frantz Fanon's assertion that settlers are highly "sensitive" to resistance, interpreting it as hostility or savagery (Fanon, 2008, p. 93). Officers enforced rules that favored tourists, which is a sad example of complicity. But the family quietly fights back by leaving their tent even though they aren't supposed to, making sure they are still there. The novel illustrates how racial entitlement, law enforcement, and spatial regulation perpetuate colonial hierarchies, even as Indigenous communities continue to resist.

The collective narrator in the work reveals the epistemic violence of tourism, where outsiders confuse shiny pictures for reality and don't see Native Hawaiians. They say, "You think you've been here, you think you know us.... You've seen nothing at all" (Hakes, 2023, p. 1). This erasure echoes Gayatri Spivak's observation regarding the marginalization of the subaltern (1988, p. 283). However, in this context, the collective "we" resists erasure by articulating its presence in Hawaiian-inflected English. The novel places this dynamic in the context of the coloniality of being and knowing. Hawai'i is feminized and romanticized as "a dark, sin-free Native for instant gratification" (Trask, 1999, p. 137), while visitors expect docility through the *aloha* stereotype, an assumption critiqued through Quijano's (2000, p. 541) idea of the coloniality of knowledge. When Hawaiians refuse to be subservient, they are seen as hostile. This shows how tourism reinforces racial hierarchies, with the haole tourist representing modern entitlement and the Native being put in a lower position. While describing modern beachgoers, the narrative situates these visitors as the latest wave in a lineage of intrusion that began with the arrival of missionaries and sugar planters. Hakes emphasizes this historical continuity through the image of "careless white feet" (2023, p. 196). By drawing a direct line between the "god playing" haoles who historically "drained the entire district" (Hakes, 2023, p. 22) and the contemporary tourist who consumes the landscape, the text illustrates how the extractive entitlement of the plantation era has morphed into the leisure consumption of the present. Mbembe's (2001, pp. 72-81) concept of extractive regimes elucidates the functioning of tourism implemented not via direct governance but through economic hegemony, exemplified by daily tour buses disrupting local life and county regulations favoring visitors over communities. Maldonado-Torres's (2007, pp. 240-263) idea of coloniality helps us understand the Manichean division of space even better, where tourists take over public spaces that are meant for locals. However, subtle acts of resistance like leaving a tarp even though it was against the rules displays that Indigenous people have a right to the space, and the cry for a community center articulates structural inequalities and a growing awareness of decolonization. The novel utilizes a collective voice to document and critique injustices, engaging in what Mignolo (2009, p. 2) refers to as epistemic delinking: it shifts the focus from colonial fantasies of paradise to Indigenous perspectives that reveal the violence of tourism and validate Native presence.

The novel thus emphasizes tourism as a perpetuation of tropical colonial violence by connecting historical and contemporary invasions. Early reflections evoke mid-20th-century pressures when “haoles [whites] [were] telling us the only way to survive was by selling our culture to tourists” (Hakes, 2023, p. 18), illustrating how economic transformations compelled Hawaiians to commercialize tradition under the pretext of progress. This is similar to what Trask (1999, p. 137) said about how outsiders put a “ideological gloss” on tourism as the islands' savior. Some people accepted this way of thinking, but the work also shows people who fought back to protect their cultural dignity. The story as a whole reveals tourism as a neocolonial force that uses structural and symbolic violence to break up sacred gatherings, force servility, and undermine sovereignty. In speaking out against tropical tourism, the novel fits with decolonial thought, showing how colonial power changes into industries like tourism, where conquest continues under leisure. Through the commodification of hula, the novel exposes how tourism turns out to be one of the most powerful ways to control people.

Cultural Commodification and Appropriation of Hawaiian Identity

To understand the cultural battleground depicted in the novel, one must contextualize hula's trajectory from sacred ritual to commodified spectacle. Hula traditionally functions as an Indigenous epistemology, combining “choreographed dance movement and melodic recitation” with hand and arm gestures that interpret poetic texts called *mele*, chant of any kind (Stillman, 2007, p. 223). This cultural continuity was severely disrupted when American missionaries condemned hula as “immoral” and “heathen,” leading Queen Ka’ahumanu to ban public performances in 1830 (Nakamura, 2023). The practice survived underground until hula “reemerged in public view in the 1860s” when “poets and hula masters brought back to light a repertoire that had been maintained underground” (Stillman, 2007, p. 225). King Kalākaua's revival in the late 19th century marked a turning point, as hula masters created westernized forms like *hula kui*, performed with guitar and piano (Stillman, 2007, p. 225). However, the overthrow of the monarchy in 1893, and the U.S. annexation enabled corporate tourism to transform hula into “entertainment for profit,” replacing traditional *pā’ū* (skirts) with cellophane versions (Trask, 1999, p. 144). Throughout Hawaii's territorial era, hula persisted “as a paradoxical icon”, appearing Westernized yet maintaining “a bodily form of resistance” through continuous performance practice (Stillman, 2007, p. 221). Despite archival institutionalization and commodification, “performance skills of hula remained in continuous practice,” enabling a revival when the cultural resurgence of the 1970s brought “intense interest in hula” and the ascendance of *hula kahiko* (ancient hula) over tourist-oriented *hula auana* (Stillman, 2007, pp. 221-222). By the 1990s, “the hula tradition had come to occupy a central position in contemporary identity politics,” standing as “a powerful assertion of cultural self-determination among native Hawaiians” (Stillman, 2007, p. 222). Hakes' novel

dramatizes this historical reality through the title *Hula*, signaling friction between profound ancestral dance and commercial spectacle. The text mirrors Trask's critique, describing how hula was "kidnapped by the entertainment industry, dressed in a cellophane skirt and shackled...to a well-lit stage" (Hakes, 2023, p. 60). By contrasting rigorous spiritual training with hotel shows featuring plastic shells and overly bright flowers, the novel exposes the attempted replacement of genuine *'ike* (knowledge) with synthetic fabrication, while highlighting practitioners' resilience in preserving hula's true meaning.

From a decolonial standpoint, the novel depicts cultural commodification as a continuation of coloniality wherein Indigenous symbols are appropriated and reinterpreted for the advantage of outsiders. Trask (1999, p. 17) explicitly terms this the "prostitution" of Hawaiian culture, arguing that the "grotesque commercialization of everything Hawaiian" including the reduction of traditional values like *aloha* to sales slogans, damages the psychological and political integrity of the people. The story reflects this by illustrating how the sacred practice of hula was stripped of its resistance potential and repackaged as a "tourist attraction" to serve an industry where 30 tourists exist for every Native Hawaiian (Trask, 1999, p. 3). Furthermore, Trask asserts that commodification is so complete that the cultural value of *aloha*, originally meaning reciprocal love and generosity, is now used to sell everything from cars to plumbing, turning a sacred concept into a meaningless capitalist tool (p. 3). This exploitation reduces the Native Hawaiian people to mere "ornamental artifacts" for the consumption of visitors who wish to escape into a fantasy of a "dark, sin free Native" (Trask, 1999, p. 137). The work shows how shameful and spiritually wrong it is to turn ancestral knowledge into a business by showing Ulu Naupaka, the family matriarch who loses her ancestral land and has to teach "rudimentary hula lessons to drunk tourists" on that very site. The theme continues with Laka Naupaka, Ulu's great-granddaughter, who is hired as a resort greeter in the 1960s, even though she is a great dancer. She is only seen as "ambience," so she is turned into a silent photo opportunity, and her real voice and identity are hidden. These episodes show how tourism turns both culture and people into things: sacred practices are made less important, names are erased or changed for the sake of tourists, and Native workers are taken advantage of by being paid less than they should be. The characters' suffering demonstrates how commodification erodes *kuleana* (responsibility to ancestors and land) and reinforces colonial stereotypes of Hawaiians as simple, subservient, and exotic, exposing the tourism industry as a neocolonial framework of cultural and socioeconomic oppression.

While *Hula* vividly depicts the external battle against American colonialism and tourism, it equally interrogates the internal contradictions within the Hawaiian community itself, particularly through the exclusion of Hi'i from hula performance.

Despite being Laka's biological daughter, Hi'i is initially barred from participating in the Merrie Monarch Festival not by outside forces but by the strictures of her own *hālau* and family, specifically due to questions surrounding her legitimacy and blood quantum. Although she boasts about her lineage to defend her place against a haole girl asserting, "Kumu not going say no'ting, but haole not supposed to dance hula. Only Hawaiians" (Hakes, 2023, p. 41), Hi'i herself faces marginalization because she does not fit the "pure" image required for the competition. This exclusion reveals a painful irony. While the community fights against the commodification of their culture by outsiders, they simultaneously internalize colonial metrics of authenticity based on blood and legal status. The novel portrays this as a pivotal fracture. Hi'i's struggle is not just to learn the steps but to prove she possesses the "blood memory" and right to dance despite being socially marked as an outsider in her own home. This internal gatekeeping highlights the complexity of decolonial resistance, where the trauma of dispossession can lead to rigid definitions of belonging that inadvertently replicate colonial exclusion, leaving characters like Hi'i to fight a war on two fronts against the erasure of tourism and the rejection of her own people.

The resurgence of hula is conceptualized as an act of delinking, extricating it from the colonial economy and reinstating it within its epistemic community (Mignolo, 2009, p.2). It echoes Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1994, p. 28) appeal for the restoration of genuine traditions and Mbembe's (2001, pp. 105-117) focus on the reclamation of joy and creativity post-domination. Hi'i's insistence that learning hula is our *kuleana*, Hawaiian concept that means much more than just responsibility (Hakes, 2023, p. 372), while Laka's reluctance, shaped by cultural commodification and family conflict, illustrates how colonial trauma fractures Indigenous families (Hakes, 2023, pp. 346–357). The novel depicts commodification not just as an external economic force but as an internal source of conflict that the characters must actively navigate through strategies of decommodification. The most significant moment of potential healing comes when Hulali, Laka, and Hi'i begin to reestablish their fractured connection through the practice of hula. However, the path to reclamation is deeply fraught with contradictions and internal struggle. This personal arc mirrors the Hawaiian Renaissance of the 1970s, where cultural revival fueled political resistance against land dispossession and militarization (Goodyear-Ka'opua et al., 2014, p. 9), aligning with Maldonado-Torres's (2007) assertion that decoloniality affirms life as much as it resists colonialism. Although Hi'i is initially barred from performing hula with her family's *hālau* due to her status as *hānai* and questions of blood legitimacy, a rejection that nearly drives her to abandon her heritage entirely, she does not resort to teaching a "haolefied" or commodified version of the dance to survive. Instead, the text reveals her quiet resilience. Unbeknownst to her mother Laka, Hi'i secretly joins another *hālau* and trains to compete for Miss Aloha Hula. In a pivotal moment of reclamation, Laka witnesses Hi'i rehearsing a sacred *auana* dedicated to the goddess Laka and the

desire for a child. This performance so powerful and steeped in "Naupaka blood" shatters Laka's deepest fears and assumptions (Hakes, 2023, p. 252). Far from succumbing to the "cellophane skirt" of tourism and commercialized performance, Hi'i actively re-signifies the dance. She uses the very platform of competition to honor her matrilineal line and reclaim hula as the "heartbeat of the Hawaiian people" (Hakes, 2023, epigraph). In doing so, she proves Mbembe's (2001, p. 104) concept that postcolonial subjects can subvert and redefine cultural forms to assert their own sovereignty and resist the forces that seek to reduce their culture to commodity.

Land Dispossession, Environmental Injustice, and Indigenous Resistance

The struggle over land is at the heart of Hawai'i's colonial history. The novel traces this trajectory from the 1800s, when land was seized for plantations and hotels, through the 1900s, when tourism and militarization led to excessive development. The novel portrays ecological devastation and dispossession as fundamental injustices experienced by Native Hawaiians, resonating with Quijano's notion of the coloniality of nature and Nixon's theory of ecological imperialism. This theory posits that colonial frameworks reorganize ecosystems and land ownership for profit, thereby imposing repercussions on Indigenous populations (Quijano, 2000, pp. 555-556; Oppermann, 2007, p.186; Nixon, 2011, p. 247). The Great Mahele of 1848 was a turning point because it ended communal stewardship based on the ahupua'a model (a traditional Hawaiian land-division system) and introduced Western private property (Chinen, 1958, p. 5). While tracing the history, it is quoted as, "We are *not* immigrants. We are the Native people of this "Āina whose ancestors came here two thousand years ago and first settled Hawai'i nei....we lived in a sophisticated harmony with the 'Āina. Foreigners must learn to behave as guests in our 'Āina and give respect to the Native people" (Kame'eleihiwa, 1992, p. 325). Many Hawaiians lost their land because they lacked sufficient money, and the law was weaponized to facilitate dispossession. The Naupaka family's history makes this tragedy deeply personal. Ulu's parents are forced out of Waikīkī in the 1870s to make room for the Hawaiian Hotel. Hakes writes that "In a blink, Waikiki went from fishponds and loi to coconut groves and cottages. (The only thing more profitable than sugar was hotels. So, they drained the entire district, those god-playing, disease-bringing haole, to erect their ka-ching factories.)" (Hakes, 2023, p. 22). This transformation changed a landscape that once grew food for the community into a tourist destination, forcing Native families into shantytowns where they were treated like "bruised produce" and discarded once their land was taken.

However, the novel does not present Indigenous Hawaiians as passive victims. Throughout the narrative, characters actively resist dispossession and fight to preserve their connection to the land. Ulu Naupaka, despite being dispossessed and forced to perform commodified hula in hotel gardens, becomes a guardian of authentic

cultural knowledge, secretly preserving sacred chants and dances that the missionaries and hoteliers attempted to erase. Both Hulali and Laka demonstrate against the encroachment on their land and the desecration of sacred spaces. When the novel moves into the 20th century, showing how the Naupaka family relocates to Hilo seeking safety, they encounter new injustices from statehood, tourism expansion, and military occupation. Hawaii's development model in the 1960s and '70s included evictions at Kalama Valley and the bombing of Kaho'olawe, where the Navy even struck Maui "by accident" (Hakes, 2023, p. 61; McGregor, 2007, p. 30; Teaiwa, 1994, p.100). These "scars" demonstrate that statehood, celebrated in official narratives, meant intensified pain for Native communities. The tourism boom exacerbates these injustices: more hotels mean greater freshwater extraction, increased waste, and accelerated land loss. The benefits and costs are decidedly unequal. Profits flow to corporations and haole elites from outside Hawaii, while Native Hawaiians work low-paying jobs, face rising costs of living, and endure environmental degradation (Trask, 1999, p. 144). Yet through characters like Hulali who engage in activism to protect Kaho'olawe, and Laka who maintains her dignity amidst exploitation, the novel demonstrates *aloha 'āina* (love of the land) through action. These acts of resistance, rooted in cultural memory and Indigenous ways of knowing, prove that survival is possible even under colonial and neocolonial pressure. By interweaving environmental injustice with stories of Indigenous persistence, the novel shows that the fight for land and culture remains inseparable from the fight for Hawaiian sovereignty and self-determination.

Aloha Aina as Resistance to Tourist Narratives

In the midst of portrayals of dispossession, violence, and commodification, *Hula* ultimately emphasizes Indigenous Hawaiian epistemologies and the various forms of resistance employed by Native characters against colonial and touristic domination. At the heart of these epistemologies lies *aloha 'āina*, the love of the land, which functions not merely as sentiment but as a comprehensive way of knowing, being, and acting in the world. The novel articulates this through the collective voice's foundational statement. "We are the āina and the āina is us and we're all just responsible to take care and maintain balance and pono" (Hakes, 2023, p. 21). This epistemology stands in direct opposition to Western concepts of land as property to be owned and exploited. Instead, *aloha 'āina* embodies a relational understanding where humans are stewards rather than owners, where *kuleana* (responsibility and duty) binds people to place, and where the land sustains the people in return for their reciprocal care. The novel exemplifies decolonial theory's emphasis on the pluriversality of knowledge, acknowledging that alternative epistemologies endure despite colonial repression and offer critiques of Western hegemony (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 72; Escobar, 2018, p. 94). For Hawaiians, these ways of knowing include hula, the Hawaiian language,

mo'olelo (story and history), *mo'okū'auhau* (genealogy), spiritual cosmology, and the intimate connection to *'āina* and *kai* (sea) that *aloha 'āina* represents. When Laka abandons Keaukaha for Maui, the community understands her departure as a betrayal not just of her family but of *aloha 'āina* itself. The narrator observes that by leaving, she "said none of it mattered, not the crown, not Miss Aloha Hula, not Keaukaha and her *kuleana* to it, bestowed upon her by her family's legacy" (Hakes, 2023, p. 9). This passage reveals that the failure to honor *kuleana* (sacred responsibility) to the land is understood as a spiritual and cultural catastrophe. The novel shows how *aloha 'āina* is embedded in everyday practices and choices, making it not an abstract ideology but a lived epistemology that shapes how characters understand their obligations to place and people. Learning hula itself becomes an education in *aloha 'āina* because hula is fundamentally about learning the land through story and movement. The text explains that "learning hula was studying a new language and a new way of moving, but it was also learning about the *āina*, about the environment and the relationship of the elements, about how to treat the planet and how to appreciate the forces at work" (Hakes, 2023, p. 19). In this description, *aloha 'āina* is woven into the very fabric of cultural knowledge transmission, making it inseparable from artistic practice and spiritual understanding.

Hakes illustrates how *aloha 'āina* actively informs cultural and political resistance by interweaving hula, language, and activism throughout the narrative. When Ulu is displaced from Waikīkī and forced to teach commodified hula to tourists in tropical hotel gardens, she responds not by abandoning the land but by preserving sacred chants in secrecy, embedding *aloha 'āina* in the knowledge she passes down to Hulali. The narrator tells us that Ulu insisted Hulali "embed dis knowledge into your blood" and "pass it on to da next generation" (Hakes, 2023, p. 19), creating a transgenerational commitment to *aloha 'āina* that survives displacement and commodification. Similarly, when Hulali sounded the *pū* (conch) to rally people against the Kalama Valley evictions and the bombing of Kaho'olawe, she was enacting *aloha 'āina* as political resistance. The conch call is not just a symbol of alarm but an Indigenous call to awakening grounded in the epistemology that one cannot sever the connection to *'āina* without severing one's own lifeforce. The novel's collective narrator emphasizes this throughout: "Severed the umbilical cord connecting us to the *āina*, ignoring the cry of our piko as we turned away from our life source" (Hakes, 2023, p. 10). This phrasing, framing the severance as a literal spiritual amputation, reveals *aloha 'āina* as not just political ideology but existential knowledge about what it means to be Hawaiian. The intergenerational conflicts in the novel further exemplify this dynamic through the tension between Laka's trauma-induced rejection of her heritage and Hi'i's insistence on reclaiming it. When Hi'i declares "It's our *kuleana*" (Hakes, 2023, p. 25) to dance hula and honor their connection to the land, she embodies a younger generation's commitment to *aloha 'āina* even when that commitment has

been abandoned by her mother. Hi'i's persistence shows how *aloha ʻāina* functions as an epistemology that persists across generations despite the wounding effects of colonialism and tourism. Characters who honor *aloha ʻāina* are not merely engaging in cultural preservation but actively re-signifying Indigenous knowledge and practice in ways that challenge colonial narratives. This aligns with what Maldonado-Torres (2007) calls decoloniality as both critique and affirmation of life. Rather than merely opposing colonial systems, they actively reclaim and reinvigorate the epistemologies that colonialism sought to erase. The novel reveals that *aloha ʻāina* cannot be separated from land sovereignty or cultural sovereignty. When the text states that the community must "sit your *ōkole* down and stay there" and "learn from the *kūpuna* the old chants, the *hulas* from their memories, before those *kūpuna* are no more" (Hakes, 2023, p. 11), it articulates *aloha ʻāina* as a survival practice. Through this lens, the work performs the decolonial turn by showing the colonial difference, supporting the importance of Indigenous ways of knowing through *aloha ʻāina*, and calling for a future where Hawaiian culture and land are not just for tourists but remain the heartbeat of the people. The novel demonstrates that resistance is not solely about fighting against extraction and erasure but about persistently caring for and regenerating the knowledge and lands that sustain Hawaiian identity and sovereignty.

Conclusion

This paper examines Jasmin ʻIolani Hakes's *Hula* (2023) as a decolonial literary text that frames tourism in Hawai'i as a continuation of colonial violence. The novel presents overtourism not as a neutral or harmless industry but as a form of structural domination that displaces Native Hawaiians from land, disrupts community life, and renders Indigenous presence invisible. Through its collective narrative voice and direct address to tourists, *Hula* reframes tropical leisure, development, and hospitality as everyday practices through which colonial power continues to operate, normalizing dispossession and environmental harm while privileging outsiders.

Hula also critiques the commodification of Hawaiian culture through its sustained focus on hula as a sacred practice rooted in genealogy, land, and historical memory. Colonial and touristic forces strip hula of its meaning and repackage it as spectacle through hotel performances, cellophane costumes, and staged intimacy. Against this distortion, the novel foregrounds intergenerational transmission, embodied knowledge, and refusal. Through the lives of the Naupaka women and the symbolic role of the Merrie Monarch Festival, hula emerges as a space where Indigenous knowledge is preserved, renewed, and asserted on Hawaiian terms rather than reduced to tourist aesthetics.

Land dispossession and environmental injustice further shape the novel's critique of colonial and neocolonial power. By tracing continuities from nineteenth-century land

seizures to twentieth-century tourism and militarization, *Hula* links ecological damage directly to Indigenous marginalization. In response, the novel centers aloha 'āina as a lived way of knowing that rejects land as property and insists on responsibility, care, and balance. Resistance appears through everyday acts of preservation, protest, and cultural practice rather than dramatic rupture.

This study, in its focus on one literary piece, places the novel alongside other Indigenous Hawaiian literatures and performance traditions to examine how they contest tropical tourism, environmental exploitation, and colonial/neocolonialism. These decolonial texts are a critique of tropical overtourism, land dispossession, and cultural commodification in Hawai'i. Through storytelling grounded in land, memory, and cultural practice, *Hula* restores Indigenous presence to a landscape long imagined as paradise, reminding readers that Hawai'i is not a backdrop for tourism but a homeland shaped by history, loss, and resilience.

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