Border practices and decolonization in a rural indigenous community

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Prelude

My research focuses on political and economic autonomy in the rural Kanaka ‘Ōiwi’ community on the island of Molokai. The journey that brought me to selecting Molokai as the case study for my research begins with a border crossing and an acknowledgment of unspoken territorial fealty. For many Kanaka ‘Ōiwi social etiquette requires that in order to enter a place we must be invited in. This is most evident on the domestic scale where visitors announce themselves, generally by calling out to the occupants of the house, and then waiting for acknowledgement before approaching. This practice operates at other scales as well.

As a Kanaka ‘Ōiwi, I was raised in a society that did not go where we did not belong. Our family was centered on the island of O‘ahu and my mother has genealogical connections to Kaua‘i and Hawai‘i island. As a family we visited those islands frequently. However, the island of Molokai, though alluring and interesting to me, was not a place to which I could just go. I needed an invitation.

This behavior is very different from the American protocol of knocking prior to entering someone else’s home. There is a social etiquette attached to this behavior but the more dominant reason for knocking is the US legal system. It is illegal to cross onto someone else’s property without permission. This territorial protection does not apply, though, to municipal and state borders within the US. For the most part, US citizens have the legal right to travel with complete liberty across state borders without permission.

In this paper I seek to enrich the analysis of decolonization and self-determination within an Indigenous community by applying analytic tools from the field of political geography. The paper brings into conversation geo-political theories of borders and boundaries with indigenous political thinking on movements towards
decolonization and social political theories of modernity, capitalism, imperialism and the social imaginary. I assert that these practices manifest an imagined border that visitors, potential settlers, and transnational corporations navigate when visiting, settling or attempting to profit from the island and its people. These discursive practices emerge out of the community’s social and economic practices that are both rooted in Kanaka Maoli cultural values and modern political and social realities.

**Theoretical considerations: Borders, colonies, and indigenous self-determination**

This section of the paper puts theories of boundary and bordering practices in conversation with the work that indigenous scholars have done theorizing decolonization and self-determination. The relationship of Indigenous peoples to place, a storied land base with familial ties to the people, is fundamental to indigenous thought and practice and, as articulated by indigenous scholars Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, reclaiming and regenerating this relationship to land is a necessary element in the movement towards decolonization and self-determination.²

**Avoiding the State**

I begin with a consideration of non-state social formations prior to and during the early modernist colonial project. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* by James Scott³ lays out a framework of avoidance of the State that non-hierarchal, egalitarian and self-sufficient communities have been engaged in since State formation first emerged.

Scott identifies four eras of political organization that, although an oversimplification of historical process, illustrates the progression from stateless to State domination. First a stateless era (by far the longest), followed by an era of small-scale states encircled by vast and easily reached stateless peripheries, then a period in which such peripheries are shrunken and beleaguered by the expansion of state power, and
finally, an era in which virtually the entire globe is administered space and the periphery is not much more than a folkloric remnant.⁴

As State formations moved into the vicinity of non-state peoples, they exerted pressure on these peoples to become a part of the State. Failing that, they inscribed them with ethnic identity or tribal identity to make them legible to State institutions. States also attempted to manufacture state-like relationships within these peripheral communities, transforming the leader and follower relationship of the heterarchy into more legible Ruler and Subject relationship. “Claims to charismatic, personal authority were indigenous to the hills,” Scott writes, “but the universalizing, Indic state-making formula represented an attempt to make it a permanent institution and to turn a leader with followers into a Ruler with Subjects” ⁵.

Scott enumerates a number of strategies that various hill peoples used to maintain their heterarchy and keep the State at bay. He presents evidence of non-state peoples’ continual adaptation to attempts by the State to fold them into its authority and domination. Tactics of evasion and adaptation resulted in a fluid constellation of dynamic equilibrium between valley States supported by sedentary populations and agriculture and the mobile non-state peoples in the hills, the deserts or other fringes of the State. Individuals within this constellation moved freely between State and non-state and in many places an economic relationship developed between the two. Each existed as it were in the other’s shadow ⁶.

European imperial expansion interrupted this dynamic equilibrium and added an additional layer of domination and control in the relationship between localized State formations and the non-state peoples at its peripheries. The imperial project of Western nations was fuelled by capital accumulation. Rather than co-existence its aim was to “colonize the periphery itself” and transform it into “a fully governed, fiscally
fertile zone.” Capitalists disciplined the local labor force, often in league with local ruling elite, in order to extract resources; and, in the Americas, Australia and New Zealand settlers colonized the land, attempting to violently remove the indigenous populations from the land or force them to assimilate into the settler-colonial nation state.

Scott maintains that his analysis of State evasion falls apart in the present era of neoliberal capitalist expansion because of the rapacious rate of capital accumulation. However, the emergence of Indigenous movements to reclaim territory and to reclaim the indigenous social and cultural structures and relationships within those territories provide evidence that peripheries still exist in the folds and corners of the neoliberal globe even as these peripheries are complicated by neoliberal expansion. The case study presented in this paper points to ways that Indigenous (non-state) peoples persist and are laying claim to their own political agendas.

Inchoate Boundaries and Seeing Like a Border

In the article “Categories, borders and boundaries” Reece Jones defines boundary studies as the comprehensive study that encompasses “the inchoate process of bounding that results in categories that shape, organize and control everyday life.” Jones argues that there is a spatial component to the boundary process from which categories emerge and that there is a paradoxical relationship between boundaries and the categories that are contained by those boundaries. The relationship is paradoxical because categories are perceived as fixed and boundaries are conceived as always in the process of becoming. Without the process of boundary formation (without the boundary) there is no container into which the things (the categories) can be put.

Early research in the field of boundary studies was confined to borders, emerging as it did in the nineteenth century out of the modernist project of State
building. Research in boundary studies up to this point was limited to lines on the ground. As the Cold War ended, Jones writes, the container of 'boundary studies' was "contested and rewritten," globalization discourses took on a new credence, and post-foundational and post-structural critiques gain a foothold in academia. This globalization discourse attempted to imagine a world without borders or boundaries. However, many in the field of boundary studies countered that at the same time that borders were being dismantled – the fall of the Berlin Wall – borders elsewhere were hardening – the increased securitization of the US-Mexico border. Jones also notes that at this time research in boundary studies was expanding to include bounding narratives and practices. These narratives and practices were limited to considerations of political borders and the social boundaries surrounding them (2009, 182).

Jones’ historical narrative of 'boundary studies' exemplifies the way that boundaries as containers are porous. They are not fixed and the process of boundary formation is continual, a process of “becoming.” This leads to the paradoxical relationship between the container and the category referred to above. The boundaries are never fully formed and yet categories are perceived as fixed. Intellectually we know that the boundaries between categories are “open and porous” and yet we “tend cognitively to understand categories as closed and bounded containers.” Jones asserts that the bounding process “should be seen as an affirmation of the crucial role categories and boundaries play in how the world operates and an example of how boundaries shift, fold, harden and soften over space/time.” Focusing on the inchoate process of boundary formation provides an avenue for destabilizing categories. Jones continues: “The necessity of re-narrating and constantly patrolling boundaries is evidence of their incompleteness, a fact which allows for further contestation and re-evaluation.”
Contestation and re-evaluation of borders can take many forms. I am particularly interested in the possibilities that open up for indigenous communities to contest and alter power relations with the nation-state and its agents through border practices. In this paper I present evidence of an indigenous community turning the inchoateness of boundaries to their advantage by controlling discursive practices around borders, boundaries and categories in their island community. This analysis of the porousness of boundaries provides an analytical platform to develop strategies for decolonization and empowerment in indigenous communities.

Colonization, boundary making and the rise of capitalism:

In his book *Modern Social Imaginaries* Charles Taylor questions the way that social science generalizes modernity as a singular phenomenon. Instead, he asserts, Western modernity should be conceived of as being inseparable from a certain kind of social imaginary. He also asserts that “non-Western cultures have modernized in their own way”, and that the differences among today’s multiple modernities need to be understood in terms of divergent social imaginaries. Where these divergent imaginaries meet there is a border region that I examine in the next two sections of this paper.

The colonial project features strongly in the dense relationship between capital and the nation-state. *The New Imperialism* by David Harvey draws a distinction between imperialism by the state and imperialism through capital accumulation. He defines capitalist imperialism as a contradictory fusion of the politics of state and empire and the "molecular processes of capital accumulation in space and time." He characterizes the politics of state as a "project on the part of actors whose power is based in command of territory and a capacity to mobilize its human and natural resources towards political, economic and military ends," whereas the molecular processes of capital
accumulation is "a diffuse political-economic process in space and time in which command over and use of capital takes primacy." 17

Nation-states build empire by expanding geographic boundaries. Power arises from command of territory and the citizenry within that territory, whereas imperial capitalism asserts a different form of territoriality. Successful capitalism depends on acquiring the material resources needed for production at the lowest cost possible. Territorial boundaries are less important to a capitalist because they are willing and able to invest capital anywhere that profits can be made. Instead, in a capitalist economy, private property and other types of contractual arrangements such as rights to resources are important ways of controlling territory. This requires either being able to control the people residing on the land or emptying the land.18

Colonialism was the handmaiden to nation building and colonies became places to practice disciplining humanity into well-ordered societies at the expense of the already established societies existing below the colonial landscape. European conquerors made territorial claims on indigenous land through a variety of strategies; including military force and establishing colonial hierarchies.

The project of modernity involved relentless categorization. Foucault saw this as a project to discipline “human multiplicity” into the well-ordered society as one that formed manageable units (categories) and solid separations (boundaries) between the categories.19 This European modernist project to discipline the “human multiplicity” is at the heart of colonization. It led to attempts to discipline the indigenous population out of existence. The meeting of indigenous peoples and European and American colonials has had tragic consequences for indigenous life ways. However, the indigenous imaginaries that enable these practices in communities persist, even if in the shadow of the dominant political and social power.
**Indigenous Social Imaginary and Decolonization**

In the contemporary era I see the modernist project being succeeded by a project that calls into question rigid borders and boundaries. This opens up the possibility for decolonization work to happen in the interstices, the border regions, between the ever-changing scenarios at the national and international scale. Indigenous communities working at the local community scale can perhaps exploit the porous contingency of boundaries; and engage in bordering practices of their own that allow them more control in their homeland.

In his book *Wasáse: Indigenous pathways of action and freedom*, Mohawk scholar and activist Taiaiake Alfred argues that transformation begins with the indigenous individual consciously rejecting the colonial postures of weak submission, victimry, and raging violence. Decolonization becomes reality, he continues, when indigenous communities commit to altering power relations thus rearranging the forces that shape indigenous individuals’ lives. Rather than mimic foreign logics of power, Alfred writes, indigenous peoples need to “reconnect with the spiritual bases of their existences” and “reorganize communities and take advantage of gains and opportunities as they occur in political, economic, social and cultural spheres and spaces created by the [decolonization] movement.”\(^20\) This is achieved through cultural resurgence, a return to the peoples’ spiritual connection to place and ancestors in a modern political context.

**Theoretical conclusions**

In this section I have used the work of Scott, Jones, Taylor, Harvey and Alfred to examine transformations and shifts in thinking that challenge the hegemony of nation state and capitalism. My work pays particular attention to settler-colonial nation states in which Indigenous peoples have survived attempts to erase them from the landscape. What has survived is a deeply rooted connection to a storied landscape and from this
landscape cultural resurgence emerges as a movement towards decolonization and self-determination for Indigenous peoples.

**Crossing the Border into a “Most Hawaiian Island”**

In this section I examine the Molokai imaginary, the set of behaviors, beliefs, expectations, and shared assumptions that animate everyday practices in the Molokai community, and the border region where the Molokai imaginary meets the imaginary of global capitalism.

I first crossed over to Molokai to attend a conference on sustainable economic development sponsored by a cohort of long-time residents and Kanaka ʻŌiwi on Molokai. The organizers brought resources together to present models of economic development that would provide long-term good for people while protecting the land from overuse. Although Molokai residents cannot control immigration to their island, they are sensitive to undue outside influence in island decision-making. This conference was free to Molokai residents and outside attendees, mostly people making presentations in their area of expertise, paid a conference fee and were carefully screened by the organizing committee. I was one of those attendees who made it past the screening committee and paid my registration fee.

**Research Site**

Molokai is a rural island that is divided into three distinct regions: the mountains and valleys of East Molokai, the central plain, and the open terrain of West Molokai. According to the 2000 census data, Molokai’s population of approximately 7,000 is predominately Native Hawaiian. Prior to the arrival of Europeans in the late eighteenth century, Kānaka ʻŌiwi lived primarily in the valleys of East Molokai where water and land resources supported a thriving population.
Providing for their own sustenance through farming, hunting and fishing is practiced by many Molokai residents and is a part of the Molokai imaginary. In her book *Na Kuaʻaina: Living Hawaiian Culture*, Davianna McGregor uses the concept of cultural kīpuka to describe the survival of Kanaka ʻŌiwi cultural knowledge and practice after contact with Euro-American concepts of politics and economy. In Kanaka ʻŌiwi epistemology, kīpuka refers to areas of vegetation that have been bypassed by a lava flow. They are remnants of the sub-tropical forests that "regenerate life on the barren lava that surrounds them."

Cultural kīpuka, then, are communities of kuaʻaina in which Western economic, political, and social forces have had less effect on the communities social imaginary than in other communities in the archipelago. According to McGregor cultural kīpuka emerge because these regions are geographically isolated and unsuitable for industrial agricultural production. Being isolated geographically from centers of trade meant that the island's economy didn’t fully fold into the market economy introduced by Euro-American explorers, traders, and missionaries. Without access to a steady cash income, residents of these cultural kīpuka depended on traditional knowledge and practice to provide for their sustenance.

Today on Molokai the sustenance economy operates alongside the market economy. There are few amenities on the island and many on Molokai provide for themselves by hunting, fishing and gardening. Participation in a subsistence economy requires an intimate knowledge of the island’s resources. The practices embedded in Molokai’s subsistence economy include practices of sharing work and resources with family and neighbors and is sustaining rather than extractive. These practices are in direct conflict with the practices of transnational corporations that enter communities to extract resources not develop relationships. Subsistence practices bring Molokai
residents in closer contact with the land and traditional culture. These relationships are the foundation for regenerating sustainable indigenous self-determination.

The oldest capitalist venture on the island is Molokai Ranch. In the nineteenth century, a group of haole (white) businessmen from Honolulu purchased land on Molokai’s west end to form Molokai Ranch. Guoco Leisure Limited, a transnational corporation headquartered in Singapore, eventually acquired Molokai Ranch and although ranching activities still occur on its land, the corporation’s primary economic activity is real estate development.

For over ten years a coalition of diverse residents led by Kānaka Ōiwi have been engaged in community-based planning, looking for solutions to Molokai’s dire economic situation. Residents are determined that any economic solutions also provide long-term benefits to the community. Unlike Guoco Leisure Limited, the economic and political goals of the Molokai community are anchored to a Kānaka Ōiwi sense of place and Kānaka Ōiwi concepts of aloha `āina and mālama `āina (to love and care for the land). These concepts require that individuals take on a stewardship role to the land and natural resources irrespective of who owns the land.

Molokai residents capitalize on the power of the Molokai imaginary to assert a progressive community-based development agenda for the island. In a planning document published by Ka Honua Momona, the Molokai community claims an identity that is anathema to the neoliberal image of an industrious community. The people of Molokai, the document asserts, are stewards of the land and ocean resources, a community for whom “wealth is measured by the extent of one’s generosity.”

Lā`au Point – territoriality at work in an Indigenous context

The political struggle that erupted over the development at Lā`au Point, Molokai on Molokai’s pristine southwest shoreline is a good example of territoriality at work in
an Indigenous context. Molokai residents are actively engaged in resisting the changes to their lifestyle that real estate development brings. They are also aware of the need to participate in the market economy but they want to do so on their own terms. However, one of the major stumbling blocks is finding the resources that would make their vision of responsible community-based development on the island possible. Guoco Leisure Limited played to this community need in order to get community support for its own development agenda.

Although the Lā`au Point project was on land that the corporation owned outright, the corporation knew that it did not have complete territorial control. Hence, Guoco Leisure Limited, the largest landowner on the island, introduced the Lā`au Point development in the context of Molokai’s community-based planning efforts. At first the community welcomed the corporation’s participation in planning for the island’s future. Guoco Leisure Limited offered the community control over large portions of land, through land trusts and easements against further development as well as employment opportunity at a refurbished resort complex. In exchange the corporation expected community support for the development of 200 luxury homes at Lā`au Point. There was much community outcry against the development.

Fishermen voiced concerns that developing Lā`au Point would adversely impact the fertile offshore fishing area that provides sustenance for island residents. Farmers insisted that there was not enough water on the island to support the development and many residents from across the island did not want a “gated community of millionaires” living on one end of the island.30 After a summer of community protest, the corporation withdrew its plan for Lā`au Point. It also withdrew participation in planning for Molokai’s future and is now in the process of disposing of its Molokai holdings.31
The Molokai community was successful at making territorial claims against private property rights of a corporation. They stopped the exploitive economic development plans of a transnational corporation but not without creating contention within the community between those who felt that by compromising with the corporations they could secure the island’s economic future and those who refused to compromise.

*Media representation of the border*

As the Lā`au Point episode shows, people who visit the island and people (and corporations) who wish to move to the island must negotiate the difference between the Molokai and Western imaginaries. One gateway to Molokai is the Visit Molokai website which claims to feature “everything about Molokai by folks who live on Molokai.”

One of the featured works on the Visit Molokai video page is *Molokai Return to Pono*, a video whose expressed goal is to help with that negotiation. The short prologue to the video states that:

… the following is intended for those who are visiting, recently moved to, or just wanting to learn a little bit more about the island of Molokai. Please embrace this mana`o and allow it to help you better understand Molokai-nui-a-hina, her people, her culture, her history, and her future.

Implicit in this prologue is the message that there are things that visitors or new residents need to know before entering. It is interesting to note that the Hawaiian word mana`o, which in this context refers to knowledge, and the phrase Molokai-nui-a-hina, a name that invokes Molokai’s genealogical relationship to the goddess Hina, are not translated. The visitor or new resident is graciously invited to learn about Molokai but the newcomer must be willing to work for the knowledge.
The main body of the video Molokai Return to Pono is a cinematic expression of the Molokai imaginary. The filmmaker begins by positioning Molokai as a part of the global desire for harmony through sustainability. The film does not dwell in the global, though, moving in rapid succession from an image of the earth down to a satellite view of Molokai. The cinematic sequence constructs the Molokai border; an island bounded by water and, quoting from the film, “a community working towards healing, balance, self-governance and sustainability by returning to the values of its ancient past”.

The next two sequences, “Ancient Times” and “Degradation of an Island”, articulate the border between Molokai and the outside by juxtaposing Molokai’s ancient social order with the destruction wrought by Western culture. “Ancient Times” positions Molokai as a place of former abundance and a place of ancient knowledge. “Degradation of an Island” carries the narrative into contact with Western culture and the degradation of the island’s people and resources after the arrival of Westerners. Degradation is an interesting choice of words implying that what has been lost is recoverable. The conclusion of this segment lays out the problem that contemporary Molokai kamaʻāina (children of the land) are facing. Capitalism drastically changed the relationship of the people to the land and this must be rectified. Molokai and her people must return to pono or a righteous relationship to the land.

The video continues with the sequences “Spirit of the People” and “Most Hawaiian Island”. “Spirit of the People” portrays the work of strong willed activists and respected elders fighting side-by-side to protect native Hawaiian rights and to stop unwanted development. “Most Hawaiian Island” portrays Native Hawaiian bodies practicing Native Hawaiian culture. These two sections construct a social boundary between Molokai, the rest of the archipelago and the world. This film shows the Molokai community moving beyond destructive relationships of colonization. It
develops the narrative of the community engaging in cultural resurgence and
decolonization and moving towards self-determination.

A Final Reflection on the Molokai imaginary

Expressions of the Molokai imaginary appear not only in planning documents and
videos. It can take the form of a sign on the front door of the Friendly Market, the
largest and busiest market in Molokai’s only town.

The text of the sign reads:

_Aloha Spirit required here. If you can’t share it today please visit us some other time._

_Mahalo!_

This sign appeared after a customer, a newcomer to the island, threw something at a
store clerk because a certain product wasn’t available. People on Molokai passionately
protect their Molokai lifestyle and as in the Friendly Market example the imaginary can
erupt into spontaneous instructions for living on Molokai.

Conclusion

In this paper I have not been attentive to the mainstream perspective on borders
and border work that focus on the mobilities and flows across nation state borders or
methods used by nation states to securitize borders. Instead I conceptualize borders
from the perspective of Indigenous political actors. On Molokai these indigenous
political actors are cosmopolitans, living in and across borders,37 who successfully
challenge transnational corporations with sophisticated narratives that emanate from
the Molokai imaginary. The Molokai community, Kanaka ‘Ōiwi and settlers alike,
continue to assert territoriality over their island. The community expresses in a variety
of ways a Molokai imaginary that forms a social boundary. Once newcomers
successfully negotiate this social boundary they are no longer strangers; they have
crossed that border and are members of the community.
1 Kanaka ʻŌiwi, Native Hawaiian and Indigenous Hawaiian are used to refer to the Indigenous People of the Hawaiian Islands. Acknowledging that the term Indigenous has fluid meaning, I identify Indigenous peoples, such as Kanaka ʻŌiwi, as peoples who are rooted to a specific land base through cultural production, knowledge systems and ancestral ties.


4 Ibid., 324.
5 Ibid., 113.
6 Ibid., 216–219.
7 Ibid., 10.

9 Ibid., 182.
10 Ibid., 181.
11 Ibid., 184.
12 Ibid., 189.
13 Ibid., 183.
14 Ibid., 13.


17 Ibid.


20 Alfred, Wasa’se, 22.


23 McGregor, Nā Kuaʻāina.


25 McGregor, Nā Kuaʻāina, 8.

26 Kuaʻāina literally means back of the land, figuratively the word refers to a rustic person Pukui, Hawaiian Dictionary, 168.

27 McGregor, Nā Kuaʻāina, 8.

28 Ibid., 201.


34 visitmolokai.com, “Molokai, Hawaii - Molokai Video Tours.”
36 Ibid.