

Positioning the Pacific as a Disabling Environment: Reading of Kiana Davenport's *The House of Many Gods*

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes Kiana Davenport's *the House of Many Gods*, a novel that contextualizes the issue of the nuclearized Pacific and the islanders' exposure toward the toxic substance as an intersection between environmental/eco-criticism and disability studies. Deriving from Carrigan's concept of disabling environment, this article foregrounds the continuation of western colonialism and nuclear militarism in the Pacific which is positioned as the periphery, far from the Western metropolitan center. The presence of nuclearized military installations in the Pacific articulates the unequal relationship between the metropolitan center and distant overseas colony in the Pacific as a site for experimentation. The novel dramatizes how the islanders are exposed toward dangerous and toxic substances which ravaged their bodies, denied their agency as healthy citizens, alienated them from their landscape (*aina*) and kept them in a state of continuous disablement. Employing Carrigan's concept of disabling environment, this paper argues that the exploitation of indigenous people is legitimized under the guise of advancing Western scientific advancement. This study concludes that the Pacific islanders as it is represented in *the House of Many Gods* are instrumentalized as the 'non-human' in which their existence is necessary for the scientific progress of the Western powers.

Keywords: ecocriticism, disabling environment, Hawai'ian literature

INTRODUCTION

Concealed behind the Edenic image of tropical paradise, the history of Pacific archipelago is marred with the lingering presence of Western militarism. The belief that this island chains are separated by thousand kilometers of vast ocean caused the United States and its Allies to appropriate an enormous portion of the Pacific to detonate hundreds of deadly atomic and hydrogen weapons within the Marshall Islands. (DeLoughrey, 2011; Firth & Strokirch Von, 1997; Taitingfong, 2019) Under the assumption that the seemingly isolated islands resembled a 'contained space of a laboratory', this archipelago suffers from years of militarism. As one example, the Marshall Islands were used as a nuclear testing grounds to foresee the impact of radiation during the height of the Cold War. This appropriation of Oceania for Western military purposes is legitimized through the differing conception between the West and local islanders concerning the status of Pacific Ocean. As asserted by Hau'ofa, a notable Oceania scholar,

there is a gulf of difference between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a far sea' and as 'a sea of islands. The first emphasizes dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centers of power. When you focus this way, you stress the smallness and remoteness of the islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things (1993, p. 7)

By designing the Pacific Ocean as islands in a far sea, Western powers designates this landscape merely as faraway object from their center, a suppression of island history and indigenous presence. Pacific Islands is designated as a 'virgin, romanticized nature', hence as -passive, non-agent and non-subject" in which their territory is appropriated toward advancing the Western civilizations. (Plumwood, 2003, p. 52)

The detrimental condition caused by nuclear contamination is inseparable with the plight faced by the indigenous people. Toxic radiation due to the exposure toward the harmful substance is a major concern by local islanders all around Pacific. The indigenous communities are subjected to vast amount of toxic emitted of Western military installments. Ireland (2011, p. 240) situates the plight of the local Enetewak islanders who suffered as a result of the U.S nuclear testing in Marshall Islands. The conception of isolated islands as faraway testing laboratory rationalizes the continuation of nuclearized zone in the Pacific. Indigenous people, living in close proximity toward nuclear tests sites were rarely informed of the biohazardous substance until it unknowingly ravages their bodies. This phenomenon is foregrounded through a scathing critique from Nelson Anjain, a Rongelap islanders.

"Your entire career is based on our illness. We are far more valuable to you than you are to us. You have never really cared about us as people – only as a group of guinea pigs for your government's bomb research effort. For me and the people of Rongelap, it is life that matter most. For you, it is facts and figures. (Anjain, quoted in Johnson & Barker, 2008, p. 135)

A successful campaign of camouflage, identified as militourism by Teresia Teaiwa (2001) managed to conceal this issue from wider public consciousness. Militourism is a phenomenon by which military or paramilitary forces ensures the smooth running of a tourist industry, and that the same tourist industry masks the military forces behind it. (Teaiwa, 1999, p. 251) As an example of militourism, the booming tourist industry in Hawai'i started in the aftermath of the Second World War, in which the returning American marines promotes the image of Hawai'i as 'south east paradise' into the mainland America. Sasaki (2016) contextualizes how the popular imagery of Hawai'i is employed as an example of successful American multiculturalism, while disregard the history of racial conflict, disenfranchisement of the Hawai'ian islanders, and the militarism of Hawai'i as the front line of American defense. Up into the present era, many tourist brochures, website and advertisement foregrounds vivid descriptions of Hawai'i's island scenery, beaches and water sport, and the hospitality of the natives. (Kaomea, 2000) Their successful advertisement mars the fact that significant military presence still lingers in Hawai'i in form of nuclear installations, U.S Navy naval base in Pearl Harbor, and the use of isolated island *Kaho'olawe* for weapon testing.

The Hawai'ian ethnic group, *Kanaka Maoli* disproportionately suffers from the forced appropriation of their lands for military purposes and their exposure towards the hazardous chemical emitted from the facilities. (Kay-Trask, 1993; Vogeler, 2014) The militarization of Hawai'i, which is best symbolized by the presence of U.S Navy in Pearl Harbor is legitimized under the guise of protecting national American security. The Navy bombed valleys for artillery practice, took *Kaho'olawe* Island for a target range, tossed families out of homes, and eventually brought nuclear weapons to the Islands. (Linnekin, 1997, p. 407) While the military controls huge land areas for bases and settlements, the *Kanaka Maoli* are segregated into urban areas or rural slums, which makes them more prone towards exposure from the dangerous

substances emitted from U.S military bases. The presence of U.S Naval bases destroy the traditional fishing grounds for the *Kanaka Maoli*, pollute the waters around the harbor from the nuclear submarines, and the toxic pollution slowly accumulate and ravages the islanders' bodies.

at this moment, we (*Kanaka Maoli*) face grave problems that range from environmental poisoning, nuclear radiation, and high infant mortality to land dispossession, economic marginalization, and militarization of our areas. (Kay-Trask, 1993, p. 115)

This present study contextualizes how the nuclear colonialism in the Pacific and the islanders' exposure toward the toxic contamination underlines the intersection among disability studies, environmental/eco-criticism and post-colonialism. The ongoing presence of Western nuclear powers which conduct their nuclear testing in the isolated Pacific, far from their homeland exemplifies how the relationship between the metropolitan centre and the colony as periphery remains unequal, which results in joint oppression of the natives and their despoiled land. Moreover, the toxic/contaminated bodies are positioned as the 'ecological others', alienated from the other healthy citizens, denied their agency and are instrumentalized as guinea pigs for further Western nuclear testing. As further established by Sugiarto (2020, p. 32), the discourse of poststructuralists has located society's way of thinking into binary oppositions such as normal and abnormal, and ability and disability.

This issue is problematized in Kiana Davenport's *the House of Many Gods*, a novel that vividly explores the militarism of Hawai'ian archipelago and the danger of nuclear contamination. Through reading on Davenport's narration, this paper explores how Davenport foregrounds the perimeter of Pacific Ocean as a disabling environment, in which the islanders are forced to endure the impact of nuclear radiation. Although prior analysis of Davenport's fiction by Indriyanto (2019) has begun to explore the connection between environmental issue and colonial domination, his analysis concerns more with the visible form of exploitation instead of the unseen aspect. Mbembe's concept of necropolitics provides a framework to underline the rationalization between the ongoing disempowerment of ethnic native through diseases. This concept is employed to conceptualize how the Western powers intentionally sees the islanders' ravaged body due to the overexposure of nuclear radiation as a potential source of experimentation.

On his article, *Postcolonial Disaster, Pacific Nuclearization and Disabling Environments* (2010), Anthony Carrigan argues how the Pacific archipelago denotes an example of a disabling environment. This archipelago suffers from the militarization of the Western imperial powers, especially the locals' exposure toward radiation from nuclear power plants across this 'American military frontier.' (Deloughrey, 2013, p. 244) It is important to underline that Carrigan's employment of the word 'disabling' instead of 'disabled' foregrounds the continuation of Western military presence. He argues how the Pacific island chains is "drastically conditioned by imperialist military intervention and the impact is felt in processual times." (Carrigan, 2010, p. 255) His account concerns with the impact of disabled islanders' bodies due to the overexposure towards the hazardous substances, mainly nuclear and other toxicities emitted from military installations. The toxic substances from nuclear installations subtly accumulated in the exposed party's bodies, gradually contaminated their inside until it reaches critical terms and fatality. An important statement in Carrigan's theorization is his belief that the islanders' vulnerable status towards nuclear radiation, and the lack of concerns by the military forces towards their plight is intentional:

The production of disability – including reproductive disorders and the birth of short-lived "jellyfish babies," able to breathe but typically lacking "eyes ... head ... arms [and]

legs” is portrayed as entwined with the long-term effects of nuclear disaster and the refusal by US authorities to support affected individuals.” (Carrigan, 2010, p. 264)

On his argumentation concerning the intentional ‘Othering’ of the local islanders through their exposure towards dangerous substances on their bodies, Carrigan expands on Achille Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics. Necropolitics is ‘a reconfiguration of Foucauldian biopower which suggests that controlling the rights to live or die is central to colonial operations.” (Carrigan, 2010, p. 256) The domination of Western powers extends into the realms of deciding whom to live and whom to die. The marginalized locals are subjected into a state of disability as a result of the ‘disabling environment’ which works to deny their agency as healthy citizens and is instrumentalized for advancing the Western powers’ scientific progress in harnessing nuclear capabilities. Necropolitics works through “the generalization instrumentalization of human existence and the material destructions of human bodies and populations.” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 15) Necropolitics designates the afflicted islanders as the ‘ecological others’, exposed towards unnatural substances that ravages their body from the inside, segregates them from the healthy population and alienated the natives from their ancestral landscape.

Through reading of Davenport’s, *the House of Many Gods*, this paper contextualizes the representation of Pacific islanders as an example of disabling environment. Disease caused by nuclear contamination is a pivotal theme in Davenport’s narration. She further asserts the lack of concern faced by American military forces concerning the close proximity of their military arsenal into Hawai’ians’ neighborhood. Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics illustrates how the detrimental condition faced by the *Kanaka Maoli* is intentionally caused by the Western power to disempowers the indigenous people through diseases. All per se, the affliction faced by the *Kanaka Maoli* hinders them in articulating their agency towards resisting the Western domination.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Kiana Davenport’s *the House of Many Gods* contextualizes the militarization of her home archipelago as a central concern in her narration. Her novel situates the condition of the local islanders on Wai’nae Coast, in the east side of O’ahu island which is imperiled by the encroaching American military. Besides dealing with issues such as forced land appropriation of the Makua Valley for the U.S Navy military installments and the use of sacred island *Kaho’olawe* for United States’ marine weapon testing, Davenport exemplifies the silent threat of nuclear radiation, a form of ‘slow-violence’ in Nixon’s terms. (2011) Living precariously on the perimeter of contaminated zone, the *Kanaka Maoli* are unaware of the deadly microbes penetrating their bodies until it is too late to be treated. Cancers and tumors are such examples of disabling ailments faced by the local islanders. Furthermore, Davenport conceptualizes that the danger of nuclear contamination is not merely contained in her native Hawai’i, but vastly becomes a regional and even global predicament.

Davenport conveys the ravaging of human bodies by the accumulation of nuclear radiations through several examples in her narration. Interestingly, the first mention of the aftermath of nuclear meltdown is seen from the perspective of Max McCormick, a professor of immunology who once served as one of the leading scientists in United States’ Manhattan Projects, the first attempt of harnessing the power of nuclear fission during the second World War. On one experiment, accident occurs, which results in all the scientists being contaminated. This event is contextualized in the following excerpt,

Pelevini stopped the chain reaction by knocking them apart, but in less than a second, deadly gamma and neutron radiation had burst from the assembly. I remember how a

blue glow lit the room as the air was momentarily ionized. We were all exposed. Plevini died within four days, totally out of his mind.” (Davenport, 2007, p. 79)

It is clear how the hazardous substances are lethal towards human bodies, especially after sudden exposure in large quantities of nuclear energies. The unnerving aspect about nuclear contamination lies in the fact that not all who exhale its substance died instantly. The surviving party are subjected with irrevocable damage in their internal organs.

“They monitored our blood counts and bone counts while we lost our hair and vomited, a hole in the mouthpiece allowed for a straw through which I was kept alive on liquids. But after the accident, I got hold of my medical records ... depression of lymphocytes, abnormally low number of leukocytes, patient’s exposure significant. Radiation sickness. (Davenport, 2007, p. 79)

On her essay, Serpil Oppermann (2017) theorizes about ‘the ecological other’, in which the toxic bodies exposed to hazardous chemicals and other alien agencies are alienated from other healthy citizens due of being stigmatized as unnatural. The diseased one are labelled as ‘the Other’ and suffers from prejudice and harassment due to their disabilities. Oppermann states how “they are doubly victimized; their physical, material bodies often bear the costs of environmental exploitation, and their bodies are discursively perceived as threats to national, racial, or corporeal purity.” (2017, p. 425) Her argument shed some light in analyzing the nuclear survivors as depicted in *the House of Many Gods*. Discrimination also experienced by Max through the American society’s refusal to accept the ‘Los Alamites’ survivor as part of their community. “A lot of them dropped out. You just don’t hear about us. We live quietly, rotting on the hoof” (Davenport, 2007, p. 80) Viewed from Oppermann’s concept of the ecological other’, it can be stated that the nuclear survivors possess a threat toward the ‘national purity’ of the Americans. Their very existence will open up the awareness regarding the fatal consequences of harnessing nuclear powers.

The Pacific islands, positioned in the periphery, far away from the center of civilization in mainland America becomes an ideal place for conducting nuclear testing. The Pacific Islands have long been fashioned as laboratories for western colonial interests, from the botanical collecting of James Cook’s voyages to Darwin’s theory of evolutions. (Gonzales, 2010) Under the pretext of Pacific as a site of experimentation, the Western nuclear powers continued their experimentation without considering the plight of the islanders due to their close proximity to hazardous substance. To quote Carrigan, Pacific has become a ‘disabling environment’, in which the danger of toxic contamination threated the local islanders’ life. Moreover, the silent nature of nuclear radiation causes the indigenous people to be unaware towards this threat. The danger of nuclear contamination in *the House of Many Gods* is narrated from the perspective of Ana, a local living in the rural area of Wai’nae coast, East O’ahu. At first she remains unaware of the potential danger, until her interaction with Lopaka, a retired U.S veteran. Being a former military, Lopaka realizes the militarized state of his home island through the existence of vast military installments. In line with Nixon terminology of slow violence, the poisonous substance of nuclear radiation occurs gradually as a form of ‘delayed destruction.”

Frankly, that’s not what really bugs me. It’s the day-to-day stuff. Radioactive water from the harbors and rivers seeping into our soil. The stuff we stand in, in our fields. Stuff that seeps into the grass our dairy cows and pigs eat.” (Davenport, 2007, p. 138)

The preceding paragraphs conceptualizes the silent threat of nuclear contamination, being invisible to normal eyes. The toxic substance emitted from military bases contaminates

the surrounding landscapes, which is detrimental to the *Kanaka Maoli* as they sustain themselves from the land and sea. This situation further established in the following excerpt,

Right now we've got two dozen nuclear subs homeported here in Pearl Harbor. You think they don't have accidents on those ships? Millions of gallons of radioactive waste from those subs have already been dumped into the harbor. (Davenport, 2007, p. 82-83).

In *the House of Many Gods*, a town which is particularly affected by nuclear contamination is Lualualei across the coastal road of East O'ahu. This hamlet is imperiled by the existence of Lualualei Naval Reservation, a high-security military base which is forbidden for the locals. Designed as a storage for nuclear weapons, the toxic substance corrupts the soil and ravages the local inhabitant's bodies. Children and the elderly are the most affected from the detrimental impact of nuclear radiation. Davenport narrates how three people in Lualualei is inflicted with cancer, a boy is diagnosed with muscle cancer, and a woman named Philomena is already in the advanced stages of lung cancers. This following passage vividly capture the macabre impact of nuclear contamination. "The woman had lost all flesh, the skeleton of her face now hovering just behind the skin. Ana smelled the other thing. It had already taken over." (Davenport, 2007, p. 117)

The depiction of O'ahu island, Hawai'i in Kiana Davenport's *the House of Many Gods* is a prime example of 'disabling environment' as theorized by Carrigan. The disability produced by overexposure toward chemical substances foregrounds the extent of American military intervention in this archipelago. Instead of conducting their test and preserve their nuclear weaponry in mainland America, Hawai'i is conditioned as an ideal place, far from the metropolitan centre. As this study has explored, the existence of ecological other in the form of nuclear survivors threatens the notion of national purity. The existence of faraway territory in the Pacific proves to be beneficial for the nuclear power. Under the paradigm that condones nature/culture dichotomy, the islanders are excluded from the "human" category, labelled as nature instead and this dualism is employed to exploit selected people/places. (Dessouky, 2011, p. 259) This paradigm is echoed through Laksmitarukmi's assertion that the logic of domination forms the mindset that the subordinate can be exploited for the dominators' interest. (2017, p. 24) Nuclear colonialism is racialized, as only the marginalized natives suffer from this hazard due to their proximity to the military installments.

Positioning diseases afflicted by nuclear contamination within *Kanaka Maoli* epistemology of human and non-human relationship, their relation is disrupted. Toxic diseases hinder the *Kanaka Maoli*'s connection toward the land (*aina*) which is an important factor in their tradition. It is the duty of all Hawaiians to *mālama 'āina* (care for the land) and, in return, the *'āina* will *mālama* the Hawaiians, thus achieving *pono* (well-being, balance). (Inglis, 2013, p. 44) Disease is construed as a disruption of this balance as both the *Kanaka Maoli*'s bodies are affected, but also the accumulated toxicity that devastates the surrounding landscape. Grieve's assertion of "the trauma that occurs to the landscape is equally as troubling toward the human subjects" positions the impact nuclear contamination as a traumatic situation which afflicts both the non-human and the islanders.

Another issue related to nuclear colonialism as advocated by Davenport is the far-ranging scope of Western militarism in Pacific. She argues how the plight faced by the *Kanaka Maoli* in Hawai'i is no longer an isolated issue but is a shared problem all over Pacific. Her narration underlines how years of nuclearization has caused Pacific to be 'an irradiated sea' with issues such as pollution and nuclear testing in Hawai'i, Micronesia, French Polynesia—eventually poisoning the air and the sea across the entire Pacific- as a major concern for the indigenous people. (Davenport, 2007, p. 259) *the House of Many Gods* dramatizes an international seminar for a nuclear free Pacific which is participated by speakers all across

Oceania. This event situates how the ‘disabling environment’ of the Pacific is not confined to Hawai’ian *Kanaka Maoli* but also affects other ethnicities, such as the Tahitians. The natives in Tahiti and Tuatamou suffers from severe exposure towards French nuclear weapon testing. They are forcedly conscripted as cheap sources of labor -even the children-, without any preventive means against the radiation.

Since the 1960s children as young as ten and twelve had been conscripted to work at test sites and never given protective clothes. When they began to die, their bodies were so contaminated they were buried in lead coffins. Then the coffins disappeared. They were flown to France for research. (Davenport, 2007, p. 191)

Seen from Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics, the Western powers refuse to acknowledge the agency of indigenous people as equal human beings and instead instrumentalizes their bodies in order to advance their scientific progress. The natives are being kept in a state of continuous disablement due to the rapid accumulation of hazardous substances until their inevitable death. To quote Carrigan, ‘controlling the rights to live or die is central to colonial operations. (, 2010, p. 260) By keeping individuals in a state of continuous disablement, this form of necropolitics works to deny personal sovereignty and underwrites the Tahitians’ instrumentalization as test subjects or guinea pigs.

To summarize the discussion, Kiana Davenport’s *the House of Many Gods* foregrounds the issue of nuclear colonialism in the Pacific to underline the existence of a disabling environment. The continuation of militarism is legitimized under the pretense that Pacific islands constitute faraway places from the metropolitan centre, hence an ideal location for scientific experimentation. Nuclear radiation and contamination functions to hinder the natives’ agency to resist due to their continuous disablement, a condition that limits their social duties as steward of the landscape. Moreover, Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics explores how the instrumentalization of human bodies for Western scientific endeavor segregates them from the healthy population and alienated the natives from their ancestral landscape.

CONCLUSION

Through reading on Kiana Davenport’s, *the House of Many Gods*, this article contextualizes possible intersections among disability studies, environmental/eco-criticism and postcolonial studies. Davenport echoes Carrigan’s concept that Pacific archipelago is an example of ‘disabling environment’, conditioned by Western nuclear colonization. The presence of nuclearized military installations in the Pacific articulates the unequal relationship between the metropolitan center and distant overseas colony in the Pacific as a site for experimentation. The islanders are exposed toward dangerous and toxic substances which ravaged their bodies, denied their agency as healthy citizens, alienated them from their landscape (*aina*) and kept them in a state of continuous disablement. It can be concluded the islanders are instrumentalized as the ‘non-human’ in which their existence is necessary for the scientific progress of the Western powers.

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