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Contested paradise: Kiana Davenport's fiction and the transnational critique of empire

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Abstract:
This article argues that Kiana Davenport's fiction exposes what American Studies has overlooked: environmental destruction is how the US empire operates in the Pacific. Through close analysis of Shark Dialogues *(1995),* Song of the Exile *(1999), and* The House of Many Gods *(2007), the study examines three interconnected regimes of extraction – militarization, tourism, and nuclear contamination – as expressions of the same colonial logic. Davenport''s narratives reveal how these forces transform Hawaiian land from sacred territory into strategic infrastructure and Indigenous culture into commodities. Her work demonstrates that environmental justice and decolonization cannot be separated concerns. By centring Davenport's fiction, this analysis challenges American Studies to abandon its continental framework and recognize the Pacific as central to understanding US power. The study argues*

that American Studies must integrate environmental justice into its decolonial project – not as a secondary concern but as fundamental to how empire operates. Davenport's work exemplifies why Indigenous and ethnic literatures are essential to this reorientation.

Introduction

In 2024 the world recorded its warmest year, with global average temperatures reaching unprecedented highs (World Meteorological Organization, 2025). But temperature itself tells only part of the story. The burden of the environmental crisis falls unequally. Indigenous communities, communities of colour, and the economically marginalized face disproportionate exposure to toxic contamination, resource extraction, and ecological collapse (Adamson & Slovic, 2009; Reed, 2009). These disparities emerge from centuries of territorial dispossession, racial domination, and imperial conquest. To understand how such systems persist – and how communities resist them – requires more than climate science or environmental policy. It requires attending to the narratives through which we make sense of ecological destruction: the stories we tell about land, who owns it, and who counts as worth saving. Literature, in this sense, is not ancillary to the environmental crisis. It is central to how we comprehend it.

Lawrence Buell argues that nature writing is a crucial site where environmental values and social relationships become legible (1995, p. 7). This matters especially when environmental destruction intersects with racialization, territorial dispossession, and imperial domination. Yet American studies, despite its considerable transformation, has failed to integrate this insight consistently. Scholars like John Carlos Rowe (2000) and Shelley Fisher Fishkin (2004) have successfully reoriented the discipline toward transnational and postcolonial frameworks. Environmental concerns, however, remain tangential to these reorientations. The discipline has developed what might be called a productive compartmentalization: ethnic and Indigenous studies flourish on one side, while environmental analysis proceeds on another. Environmental justice and cultural survival – deeply entangled in Indigenous and postcolonial contexts – are treated as separate analytical domains. This separation obscures how imperial power operates fundamentally through environmental control and land dispossession.

This compartmentalization reveals deeper ideological assumptions embedded in how American studies has traditionally approached nature writing. Canonical American environmental literature – exemplified by Thoreau and Muir – celebrates wilderness through pastoral and sublime imagery, presenting nature as a source of spiritual transcendence and national identity (Pond et al., 2000, pp. 4–6). Yet these celebrated perspectives rest on settler-colonial foundations. They detach land from its actual social histories: the dispossession, the

labour systems, and the Indigenous displacement that enabled their vision of pristine wilderness. As William Cronon critiques, the wilderness ideal is "profoundly a human creation" that can "leave no place for human beings, save as contemplative sojourners" (1996, p. 99). In contrast, Indigenous and ethnic environmental narratives ground themselves in embodied relationships with place, shaped by trauma, survival, and cultural memory. Robin Wall Kimmerer captures this difference: "to be native to a place we must learn to speak its language" (2013, p. 48). These narratives offer a counter-discourse, compelling a re-evaluation of environmentalism beyond narrow, romanticized lenses and toward a more just and inclusive ecological vision.

This article turns to Kiana Davenport's Hawaiian fiction to address this gap. Through close analysis of *Shark Dialogues* (1995), *Song of the Exile* (1999), and *The House of Many Gods* (2007), this study examines how Davenport's narratives expose the material violence of US empire in the Pacific. Her work reveals three interconnected forms of environmental harm: militarized landscapes, tourism's cultural commodification, and nuclear contamination. Davenport demonstrates that these are not isolated problems but expressions of the same colonial logic – one that transforms land into infrastructure and Indigenous culture into commodities. By centring her fiction within American studies, this analysis argues that environmental justice and Indigenous sovereignty must be understood as inseparable concerns. Attending to such narratives requires American studies to reorient itself: to recognize the Pacific not as peripheral but as central to American power.

As a Native Hawaiian writer of Hawaiian and Caucasian descent (*hapa*)[1], Kiana Davenport represents a significant voice within ethnic American literature, one that brings Indigenous Pacific perspectives to the field (Ho'omanawanui, 2015). Her fiction has attracted growing scholarly attention, particularly *Shark Dialogues*, which recent scholars have examined through multiple critical lenses. Møllegaard (2023) analyses how Davenport resists Western cultural hegemony by grounding her representation of sharks in Indigenous Hawaiian epistemologies, positioning them as *'aumākua* (ancestral guardians) and symbols of oceanic genealogies rather than as predatory threats. Dang (2025) traces the political dimensions of *aloha 'āina* (love for the land) as a framework for Hawaiian resistance, while Indriyanto and Napitupulu (2025) expand this analysis to show how *aloha 'āina* functions as a shared foundation for solidarity and survival across Native Hawaiian and *hapa* communities, though marked by asymmetrical power relations. These studies have established how Davenport's work articulates Indigenous epistemologies and cultural resistance.

Davenport's other works, meanwhile, have received less critical attention. The *House of Many Gods* has been examined by Indriyanto (2021), who argues that Davenport positions Hawaiian epistemology of place within Heise's transnational framework of a sense of planet. More recently, Indriyanto contextualizes how Davenport's novels collectively "conjure the historicity of Hawai'i as a postcolonial space" (2023, p. 98), reading her works in parallel to demonstrate their shared temporal and political dimensions.

These studies establish that Davenport's work articulates Indigenous epistemologies and postcolonial resistance. Yet they examine her texts separately and focus primarily on cultural representation. This study takes a different approach: it reads her three novels together as a unified environmental critique of the American empire. Specifically, it analyses how militarization, tourism, and nuclear contamination operate as interconnected forms of imperial violence in the Pacific. Doing so demonstrates why American studies must integrate environmental justice into its decolonial project.

The present state of American studies

Since its emergence in the early 20th century, American studies has sought to define "America" as a distinct cultural and intellectual project. Rooted in a nationalistic framework, the field historically emphasized cultural unity, moral exceptionalism, and a singular American identity anchored in white, Euro-American experience – what John Carlos Rowe describes as the "myth of national coherence" (2000, p. 4). This foundational vision marginalized racial and ethnic difference while overlooking the material histories of territorial expansion, imperial conquest, and ecological transformation that enabled the nation's growth. Today, debates within American studies increasingly challenge this inherited paradigm. Scholars have repositioned transnational and decolonial frameworks as central to this field's methodologies, theorizing US empire-building and settler colonialism as interconnected with environmental destruction and Indigenous dispossession (Man, 2015; Mendoza, 2024)**.** This reorientation demands engagement with the material legacies of ecological and imperial violence across the Pacific and beyond.

Traditional American Studies, dominant in the mid-20th century, was shaped by an essentialist understanding of American identity. Scholars within this paradigm sought to identify a singular national character by reading literary and historical texts as evidence of what Henry Nash Smith famously called the "myth and symbol" (1950, p. 23) of American culture. This approach framed the United States as a self-reliant nation defined by frontier expansion

and rugged individualism. Iconic tropes such as the "American Adam" and the myth of "virgin land" reinforced an image of a young, innocent civilization advancing into an ostensibly empty wilderness (Tate, 1973). These narratives celebrated national progress while erasing the histories and presence of Indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, and immigrant communities. In doing so, Traditional American Studies legitimized a narrow cultural framework centred on whiteness, masculinity, and Protestant values, presenting them as the normative foundation of American identity.

The rise of civil rights, feminist, and anti-war movements in the 1960s exposed the limitations of Traditional American Studies and prompted a shift towards more inclusive and critical approaches. This transformation gave rise to what is now known as New American Studies, which rejects the earlier model's assumptions of cultural unity and moral exceptionalism. Instead of treating American identity as fixed and homogeneous, scholars such as John Carlos Rowe (2000) and Shelley Fisher Fishkin (2004) reconceive it as fluid and shaped by intersecting migration, diaspora, and global exchange histories. This post-national perspective positions the United States not as an isolated cultural entity but as part of a larger transnational network. As Fishkin argues, studying America now requires attention to "border-crossings, diasporas, and transnational circuits of exchange" (2004, p. 9). By foregrounding multiplicity and interconnection, New American Studies challenges the insular, monolithic frameworks that once defined the field.

The 2019 Annual Meeting of the American Studies Association (ASA), themed "Build As We Fight," reflects the growing prominence of environmental and decolonial concerns within the field (*2019 Reflection*, 2019). By explicitly addressing ecological degradation, settler colonialism, and the exploitative logic of extractive capitalism, the conference theme challenged the discipline to confront issues long overlooked by traditional frameworks. Central to this call was the Hawaiian concept of ʻāina, meaning 'that which feeds', which grounds an Indigenous ethic that centres land as a living, relational entity rather than a resource to be consumed. This perspective rejects the anthropocentric and heteropatriarchal narratives that have historically shaped American cultural discourse. More than a thematic gesture, the ASA's invocation of land-based ethics signals a disciplinary realignment: it affirms the urgency of integrating ecological justice into American Studies and recognizes Indigenous knowledge as critical to this shift. The meeting thus marks a clear departure from older paradigms and highlights the ethical and methodological demands of a post-national, ecocritical American Studies.

Despite this rhetorical shift toward transnationalism, American Studies scholarship has persistently treated the Pacific as peripheral to the US empire's operations. Even as scholars have embraced post-national frameworks, they have analysed mainly empire through Atlantic, hemispheric, or Asian trade routes while neglecting the Pacific archipelagos that have served as crucial military and strategic outposts (Skwiot, 2010). Hawai'i exemplifies this oversight: the islands represent a site where imperial expansion, environmental extraction, and military occupation converge materially, yet they remain marginalized within transnational American Studies discourse. Recent Pacific scholarship insists that these territories must be understood not as romantic peripheries but as central sites of US imperial power and Indigenous resistance (DeLoughrey, 2019; Indriyanto, 2023; Ingersoll, 2023). Responding to this shift, this study foregrounds Hawaiian literature as a lens for connecting American Studies to ecocriticism. Analysis of Davenport's fiction exposes how environmental violence and cultural survival remain entangled at the empire's Pacific edge, revealing dynamics that traditional mainland-focused approaches have obscured.

The emergence of ecocriticism in American Studies

Environmental perspectives developed more slowly in American Studies than critical approaches such as feminism and postcolonialism. Heise (2008) argues that ecological issues remained marginal in literary and cultural studies because poststructuralism emphasized language and representation over material reality. Poststructuralist thought, exemplified by claims like Derrida's "there is nothing outside the text", contributed to the linguistic turn and the belief that reality is constructed entirely through language (Marland, 2013, p. 848), making direct engagement with the material world theoretically problematic. Buell, Heise, and Thornber observe that environmentalism has not followed the same literary path as feminist, civil-rights, or postcolonial movements, which found expression through novels, poetry, and drama. Environmental writing instead relies on forms that blend scientific discourse with storytelling, occupying "the intersection of narrative and science" (2011, p. 423) to depict human interaction with nature. Ecocriticism has challenged poststructuralist assumptions and created new possibilities for environmental inquiry within American Studies.

The decline of poststructuralist dominance in the 1990s and growing awareness of humanity's role in the ecological crisis opened space for environmental criticism in American Studies. As Buell (2005, p. 3) notes, terms such as "environment" and "ecology," once confined to the natural sciences, entered literary and cultural studies and became part of public discourse McIntosh had observed how environmental concepts were being "thrust into the public arena"

(1986, p. 1) similarly observed how environmental concepts were being "thrust into the public arena" as frameworks for confronting ecological degradation. This shift prompted scholars to revisit American nature writing as a cultural tradition that shaped national identity. Writers such as Emerson and Thoreau presented wilderness not as territory to conquer but as a source of spiritual insight and ethical reflection. This tradition laid crucial groundwork for modern ecocriticism, even though it carried assumptions later scholars would question.

Nature has long been central in shaping American literary and cultural identity. Early texts often depicted the landscape with awe and reverence, framing it as a source of spiritual renewal and national distinctiveness. Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* "I find something more dear and connate in the wilderness than in the street or villages" (1849, p. 321). This Romantic and Transcendental vision carried forward into the 20th century through writers who combined literary expression with ecological ethics. In *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold called for a land ethic based on "love, respect, and admiration for land," challenging readers to value nature beyond its economic use (1950, p. 223). Similarly, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) exposed the environmental damage caused by pesticide use. Her narrative moves from an idyllic rural setting to a grim vision of ecological ruin: "Everywhere was a shadow of death" (1962, p. 21). These texts shaped the American environmental imagination and laid the groundwork for ecocriticism. Yet critics argue that this tradition often universalized a white, pastoral ideal that ignored the histories of empire, displacement, and Indigenous land relations – precisely the blind spots this study addresses.

While canonical American environmental literature shaped the field's ethical and imaginative engagement with nature, it has also faced sustained criticism for its narrow cultural scope. Scholars note that this tradition, dominated by white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant writers, often rests on ahistorical and apolitical assumptions. As a result, it aligns more closely with older nationalist frameworks than with the field's post-national turn. As Cheryl Glotfelty (1996) and Rob Nixon (2011) suggest, ecocriticism has remained constrained by its origins in a white-dominated literary canon. Critics argue that these perspectives cannot fully address the environmental realities of marginalized communities or the global scale of ecological crisis. Moreover, the tradition's emphasis on local attachment and pastoral solitude often clashes with the complexities of a globalized and diverse America.

Recent scholarship has argued for a more inclusive and politically engaged understanding of nature writing in response to critiques that American environmental literature often reproduces the logic of American exceptionalism. Joni Adamson and Kimberly Ruffin, in *American Studies, Ecocriticism, and Citizenship* (2013), highlight the persistent neglect of

non-white writers and challenge the assumption that environmental literature is limited to pastoral, wilderness, and Edenic tropes. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B Handley similarly critique "the persistence of a lingering insular and/or exceptional vision of American Studies in American natural writing" (2011, p. 20). A 2009 special issue of *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* (MELUS) shows how ecocriticism has moved beyond its "white-centred" first wave to include perspectives shaped by colonialism and marginalization (Adamson & Slovic, 2009). Including these voices challenges the canon's aesthetic and thematic boundaries and affirms literature's political potential in confronting environmental injustice. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin further argue, the imagination remains central to how literature can act as a catalyst for social action and turn criticism into "a full-fledged form of engaged cultural critique" (2010, p. 12).

Ecocriticism's third wave has shifted from wilderness preservation toward environmental justice and postcolonial critique, centring Indigenous voices and marginalized communities (DeLoughrey, 2014). Yet even within this expanded framework, American Studies has marginalized Pacific literatures. This study argues that Davenport's fiction demands a further reorientation. Her narratives refuse settler-colonial notions of land as passive wilderness or exotic paradise, instead positioning it as ancestral, contested, and shaped by imperial violence. More crucially, her work exposes what American Studies has overlooked: environmental destruction in the Pacific is not a local or regional problem but a structural feature of US empire. By centring Davenport's fiction, we demonstrate that environmental justice and decolonization are not separate concerns but dimensions of the same imperial critique. This recognition reshapes what ecocriticism and American Studies must address.

Empire and extraction: Davenport's environmental critique

American environmental discourse has traditionally separated nature from politics. It portrays the natural world as untouched wilderness, economic resource, or site of personal renewal – categories that obscure how environmental destruction serves imperial power. Hawaiian literature breaks with this tradition entirely. Rooted in histories of US occupation, ecological disruption, and cultural suppression, these texts articulate an environmental vision grounded in Indigenous relationships to land and the realities of dispossession. As Hoʻomanawanui (2015, p. 321) notes, Hawaiian literature continues to express *aloha ʻāina* – "love and patriotism to a beloved land base" – alongside *kuʻe*, or resistance to American colonialism, as Native Hawaiians assert their identity as Indigenous Pacific people seeking "self-determination and political independence". Crucially, these narratives do not treat environmental concern and

political sovereignty as separate. They link ecological survival to cultural survival and Indigenous self-determination. Davenport's fiction exemplifies this integration. Her novels expose how the US empire operates through environmental control – not as incidental damage but as systematic extraction. This section examines how Davenport reveals the interconnected regimes of extraction that have transformed Hawai'i: military occupation, tourism development, and nuclear contamination.

Understanding Davenport's critique requires grasping the historical progression of extraction in Hawai'i. The process unfolded in stages, each building on the last. In the 19th century, missionary activity systematically dismantled Hawaiian religious and social structures, preparing the ground for Western economic control (Atkins et al., 1994; Silva, 2005). Plantation agriculture followed, displacing traditional land management practices and concentrating land ownership in foreign hands. This economic transformation destabilized Hawaiian sovereignty, culminating in American businessmen and settlers' 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom. The US formally annexed the islands in 1898 – not through a democratic process but to secure strategic military interests in the Pacific. Annexation marked a critical shift: it legalized the theft of Indigenous lands and introduced a new regime of extraction centred on military occupation. The post-World War II period brought tourism development, transforming the islands into a commodified destination while Native Hawaiians were pushed into service labour. Most recently, nuclear weapons stockpiling and submarine operations have contaminated land and sea with radioactive waste. Each regime – plantation, military, tourism, nuclear – did not replace the previous but accumulated, layering forms of extraction upon one another. Together, they redefined *ʻāina* from sacred, communal land into property to be exploited for imperial profit and strategic power.

Davenport's three novels reveal how this extraction operates ideologically and materially. Colonial domination, as Val Plumwood argues, constructs both Indigenous peoples and nature as passive Others devoid of agency – justifying their exploitation in service of imperial interests (2003, p. 53). Davenport rejects this logic entirely. Her work portrays land as active and sacred, a witness to colonization rather than a backdrop to it. She depicts environmental degradation alongside cultural dispossession and military occupation, showing these as dimensions of the same colonial process. Davenport grounds her narrative voice in what Kamada calls a "postcolonial subjectivity deeply entangled in layered histories of trauma, resistance, and place" (2010, p. 3). Through this voice, she exposes how military bases, tourism industries, and nuclear weapons have systematically transformed Hawaiian land from sacred, communal territory into property. Her fiction demonstrates that environmental destruction and

Indigenous dispossession are not separate consequences of colonialism – they are its central mechanism.

In Davenport's narratives, place emerges through landscapes marked by colonial violence and environmental destruction. Rather than portraying nature as pristine or timeless, she presents it as a site of historical trauma where biological and political systems intersect. In postcolonial contexts, displacement affects material relationships and cultural imagination, making literature crucial for reconnecting severed bonds between people and land. In *Shark Dialogues*, Davenport critiques the ongoing exploitation of Hawaiian landscapes through what scholars term *militourism* (Teaiwa, 1999, 2016) – the process by which fantasies of tropical paradise mask military occupation. She traces how sacred land was transformed into strategic war zones during World War II as the US military expanded its presence throughout Hawai'i. Davenport's depiction reveals the physical violence inflicted on the Big Island's volcanic terrain and ancestral burial grounds:

> News came that, on the Big Island, the U.S. Army had turned the Ka'u Desert near Kīlauea Crater into a training ground. Tanks crunched across volcano beds, and graves of ancient warriors were obliterated by machine gun and mortar firing. There were rumblings from Pele. Flame shots from her fire pit at night. (Davenport, 1995, p. 174)

The passage illustrates tension between Western and Hawaiian understandings of land. In Western, mainly American, environmental thought, undeveloped landscapes are often treated as empty wilderness spaces without value until shaped by human use. As William Cronon (1996) explains, this idea separates nature from culture and justifies land transformation through labour, settlement, or military use. This logic, rooted in frontier mythology, sees unoccupied land as available and expendable. In *Shark Dialogues,* the US military applies this view to the Ka'u Desert, treating sacred land as a neutral site for weapons testing. Davenport challenges this perception by showing how land considered "empty" by outsiders is, in fact, central to Hawaiian spiritual and ancestral life. Her depiction reveals how settler and imperial ideologies erase Indigenous meanings and convert living landscapes into zones of destruction.

Through the voices of Pono and her granddaughters, *Shark Dialogues* exposes the violent absurdity of settler-colonial development in Hawai'i. The novel's second half catalogues a series of intrusive projects – luxury resorts, spaceports, and power plants – brought by US and foreign investors, most notably Japan. These developments threaten to destroy native rainforests, poison marine ecosystems, and erase entire landscapes. As Pono warns, they will "raze this rainforest of old koa and monkeypod and ohia trees," "pollute the waters", and

"destroy everything in the area" (Davenport, 1995, pp. 188, 225–226). The land's suffering is not metaphorical but voiced: "Āinaaaa . . . ʻĀinaaa . . ." (Davenport, 1995, p. 188). Davenport's portrayal of a crying land challenges the colonial logic that treats Hawai'i as property – valued only for its capacity to serve military and economic interests. This binary, instrumental view erases Indigenous understandings of place and silences the agency of the land itself.

Davenport intensifies her critique by documenting the cumulative and systemic destruction of Hawai'i's environment under US control. These projects are not isolated intrusions but part of a broader pattern that treats the islands as a testing ground for militarism and unchecked development. The narrative catalogues the ecological consequences of these actions, revealing how settler infrastructure reshapes both landscape and livelihood. She writes:

> Irreversible pollution of coral gardens at Kāneohe. Stockpiling of nuclear weapons at Waikele. Radiation of productive fishing grounds at Pu'uloa by atomic submarines. A proposed rail transit system on O'ahu, that would devastate the tiny island's fragile volcanic foundations, traumatizing Hawai'i's ecological system as a whole. And the hideous and dangerous H-3 Freeway under construction, costing $1.2 billion federal dollars. (Davenport, 1995, p. 365)

This accumulation of environmental damage exemplifies what Escobar describes as a form of development that is "top-down, ethnocentric and technocratic" (1995, p. 44), treating cultures and communities as abstract categories – mere figures on progress charts. This model reconfigures land not as a relational or sacred space, but as a neutral surface optimized for economic or strategic utility. In Hawai'i, this approach authorizes the large-scale transformation of ecosystems – through nuclear stockpiling, rail transit, and freeway construction – under the guise of progress. Davenport's critique challenges the neutrality of development and reframes it as a colonial instrument that produces ecological instability and cultural dislocation.

Davenport's *Song of the Exile* (1999) extends her ecological and anti-colonial critique by portraying the militarization of Hawai'i as a process that simultaneously displaces Indigenous people and redefines land as strategic infrastructure. Unlike *Shark Dialogues* which foregrounds landscape desecration through visible militarism, *Song of the Exile* charts a more intimate, transoceanic mapping of environmental and cultural displacement. Set during World War II and its aftermath, the novel exposes how the language of modernization and national security conceals the systematic transformation of sacred landscapes into instruments of war.

In *Song of the Exile*, Davenport situates Honolulu's transformation during and after World War II as emblematic of imperial violence and environmental reconfiguration. The city

is not merely affected by war but actively reshaped into a militarized landscape – its spaces recoded to serve the logistical and ideological needs of empire. Davenport describes it as "a town of war nerves... the nightly whip of sirens" (Davenport, 1999, p. 181), capturing the atmosphere of constant tension and disruption that defines civilian life. Sacred and cultural sites are similarly militarized: tanks occupy 'Iolani Palace, and Waikiki Beach becomes "a mass of barbed wire" (Davenport, 1999, p. 162) with hotels emptied of tourists and repurposed for military use. This spatial transformation reflects the broader geopolitical role of the Pacific as a crucial yet frequently overlooked theatre of American imperial expansion. As scholars have noted, the region has long served as a vital outpost for US military power, yet remains invisible mainly within popular and scholarly American discourse (McDougall, 2015, p. 39). By foregrounding Honolulu's wartime remapping, Davenport reveals the imperial processes that have rendered the Pacific militarily essential while keeping it narratively marginalized.

In the latter half of *Song of the Exile*, Davenport turns her attention to the postwar transformation of Hawai'i, particularly the period leading up to its admission as the 50th US state in 1959. Following World War II, the islands underwent rapid redevelopment, most visibly through the expansion of the tourism industry. Once militarized for wartime defence, Honolulu was reimagined as a tropical destination tailored to white mainland visitors. This development narrative is entangled with neocolonial discourse, in which the Native Hawaiian is simultaneously positioned as a symbol of exotic hospitality and a source of cheap labour. As Feeser and Chan argue, tourism in Hawai'i relies on the commodification of *Kānaka* (Native Hawaiian) culture to fulfil fantasies of tropical escape, while Native residents are relegated to low-paying service roles that sustain the illusion of paradise (2006, p. 6). Davenport critiques this system by depicting how Indigenous knowledge, especially connection to land, is dismissed as backward in the name of economic growth:

> "I know I'm ignorant about your culture," Vivian said. "I'm just not meant for the islands. Your local talk. The food you eat. I have no friends. All his friends talk about is ''ina, ina."
> "Land is what Hawaiians are about."
> "But, you're not forward-thinking. Don't you see? You people can't waste precious land on farming, planting taro. You need development. Hotels. That's what progress is."
> "Hotels! So my nephews can be busboys?" (1999, p. 131)

Tourism is often promoted as vital for Hawai'i's economic growth, but Davenport reveals how its rewards flow primarily to white investors. Native Hawaiians, by contrast, are pushed into low-wage roles – beachboys, hula dancers, surfers, and hotel bellboys – serving an industry

built on their cultural imagery. As Mandelman observes, tourism in Hawai'i "instrumentalizes" Native culture, turning values like aloha into commodities for tourist consumption (2014, p. 174). Davenport ultimately portrays tourism not as progress, but as a continuation of colonial subjugation through economic dependence and cultural erasure.

The House of Many Gods shifts the focus from visible environmental exploitation to more insidious and enduring forms of ecological harm. Unlike the direct displacement of land seen in wartime militarization and tourist development, nuclear contamination represents a slower, more obscured form of violence. The novel explores how exoticized images of the Pacific help deflect attention from the violence of militarization, occupation, and weapons testing. This reflects what has been called "slow violence" (2011, p. 2) – a gradual, dispersed destruction that accumulates over time and is rarely recognized as violence. Moreover, many US nuclear installations in Hawai'i are located near Indigenous coastal communities who remain closely tied to their natural surroundings, especially the sea (Firth & Strokirch Von, 1997).

In *The House of Many Gods*, Davenport dramatizes the environmental fallout from nuclear leakage near Pearl Harbor through the perspective of Lopaka, a Native Hawaiian activist. As a vocal advocate for *Kānaka/*Native Hawaiian resistance, Lopaka articulates the Indigenous critique of nuclear contamination concealed beneath Hawai'i's carefully curated image as an untouched tropical paradise. This tension – between scenic beauty and ecological devastation – reflects what Haunani-Kay Trask aptly calls a "nuclearized paradise" (1993, p. 61). Davenport renders this contradiction through a narrative that exposes the silent, persistent presence of contamination within landscapes marketed as idyllic.

> …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)

Davenport's depiction of nuclear toxicity evokes the concealed danger of contamination embedded within the discourse of tropicality. The threat lies not in what is seen, but in what is rendered invisible by the aesthetic of paradise. As Buell notes, toxicity evokes "the fear of a poisoned world... debated, debunked, and reiterated" (2001, p. 30) and literature becomes a means to make such invisible threats perceptible. In *The House of Many Gods*, nuclear contamination affects both the environment and Indigenous communities, yet remains largely unseen. As illustrated in the following passage, the narrative brings this slow, silent violence into view.

> …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. The Navy has even admitted its hazard zone is two and a half miles in radius. That means all those farmers and kids could be contaminated. (Davenport, 2007, p. 93)

Nuclear radiation renders surrounding areas hazardous, contaminating both land and sea with toxic substances. As a form of slow violence, it unfolds across extended timeframes and remains largely invisible, making its presence difficult to trace or confront. This invisibility masks the ongoing militarization of the Hawaiian Islands and its lasting harm to the *Kānaka.*

Davenport expands the scope of nuclear contamination beyond Hawai'i, framing it as a global crisis rather than a localized Pacific issue. This internationalization is conveyed through the character of Nikolai Volenko – Niki – a Russian independent filmmaker who documents the effects of toxic radiation in his homeland. He is introduced to have been "shooting footage all over the Pacific, people sick, their children sick, even the seas are poisoned" (Davenport, 2007, p. 222). His presence signals that the environmental and human costs of nuclear exposure are not unique to the *Kānaka* but are shared by marginalized communities across national boundaries. A conversation between Ana and Nikolai underlines how nuclear radiation is a shared problem faced by both Hawai'i and Russia.

> Lights dimmed. The tape began as he narrated slowly, allowing images to inscribe themselves. Towns where everything was black—people, even sheep. Coal towns, steel towns. Towns where humans resembled something else.
> His deep, bass voice resounded. ―From Vilnius to Vladivostok, over eight million square miles … now mostly environmental horror. Even seas are poisoned. Even Arctic Ocean. Death is now exceeding births in Russia by over one million each year. Contaminated soil. Leaking waste. They are calling it toxic exposure. Old- fashioned word is poison‖
> We have it here, too. On a smaller scale.
> Da. That is why I am going to your Wai'nae coast. Why I go to Kaua'i. Is all across the Pacific. Everywhere, and never ending. (Davenport, 2007, p. 208)

This dialogue frames nuclear contamination as a global, not local, crisis. By linking distant geographies – Eastern Europe and the Pacific – Davenport highlights a shared pattern of environmental destruction caused by militarization and industrial waste. Though far apart, these sites become part of the same global map of contamination. This damage's slow, often invisible nature aligns with slow violence that unfolds gradually across time and space. Rather than treating Hawai'i as an isolated case, Davenport connects it to a broader structure of harm, calling for transnational awareness and collective resistance.

Empire's environmental legacies: Repositioning the Pacific in American Studies

Davenport's fiction exposes what American Studies has overlooked: environmental destruction in the Pacific is not incidental to US empire but central to how it operates and maintains control. In *Shark Dialogues*, she depicts the Ka'u Desert transformed into a military training ground, where tanks crush volcanic beds and ancestral burial sites are obliterated by machine gun fire. This scene reveals how military occupation physically rewrites the landscape, erasing Indigenous sacred geography and replacing it with strategic infrastructure. As Adamson and Ruffin observe, attention to environmental justice opens "deeper understandings" of how environmental belonging is shaped by race, history, and structural inequality (2013, p. 12). precisely what Davenport's narratives demonstrate. Her work shows that understanding the US empire requires examining how it transforms land itself into an instrument of control. For American Studies, this recognition cannot remain theoretical. It compels the field to ask concrete questions: How does empire operate through environmental transformation? How does it displace Indigenous spatial relations? What does sovereignty mean when the ground itself becomes militarized?

Traditional American Studies relies on a continental framework, treating the US as a bounded nation defined by mainland geography. As Rowe argues, this geographic bias sustains the "illusion of the United States as an insular and autonomous entity" (2000, p. 4), masking how empire actually operates across vast distances. Davenport disrupts this illusion directly. In *Song of the Exile*, she depicts Honolulu during and after World War II as a militarized city: tanks occupy sacred sites, Waikiki Beach becomes "a mass of barbed wire", hotels are repurposed for military use. The landscape itself is conscripted into empire's service. Yet this militarization is not temporary or exceptional – it is permanent infrastructure. Military bases remain embedded in Hawaiian territory decades after the war ended, transforming sovereignty into a fiction. Recognizing this requires American Studies to abandon the continental frame entirely. It means understanding that national power operates not only through cultural narratives but through the material transformation of territory. Davenport's depiction of militarized space shows that empire's effects unfold slowly, persistently, across generations – what Rob Nixon calls slow violence, "a gradual, dispersed destruction that accumulates over time" (2000, p. 22). American Studies must address this temporal dimension: how environmental and territorial occupation become normalized, invisible, and permanent.

Militarization does not operate alone. After World War II, the militarized islands became a strategic asset, and tourism was developed to extract profit from this controlled territory. Davenport shows how Native Hawaiians are repositioned from wartime subjects to

service workers – busboys, hula dancers, resort staff. As Fishkin observes, tourism involves "the commodification of culture and heritage" (2006, p. 5), stripping Indigenous practices of context and selling them as attractive images of aloha. Tourism is militarized by another means: the same logic of extraction, now operating through economic and cultural appropriation rather than visible force. Nuclear weapons stockpiling adds a third layer. In *The House of Many Gods*, radioactive contamination seeps into soil and water, affecting farming communities. This slow, invisible violence is what tourism aestheticizes away – the hidden consequence of military occupation. Together, these three regimes accumulate: military bases, tourism industries, and nuclear weapons all serve the same purpose. They transform Hawaiian territory and people into resources for US power.

Davenport's work demonstrates that environmental justice cannot be confined to local or national analysis. By connecting nuclear contamination in Hawai'i to broader patterns of militarization across the Pacific, she reveals what American Studies must recognize: imperial power operates through environmental damage that crosses borders and generations. This demands a transnational approach. Environmental justice, ethnic studies, and American Studies must work together – what Adamson calls "entangled trajectories" (2017, p. 131) – to examine how imperial actions create ecological harm requiring collective responsibility. Davenport insists that American Studies look beyond cultural representation to the material legacies of empire: contaminated soil, militarized land, displaced communities. Her fiction shows why this integration is urgent. Environmental destruction and Indigenous dispossession are not separate consequences of colonialism. They are its central mechanism. American Studies cannot address one without addressing the other.

Centring Hawai'i in American Studies is not simply about geographic inclusion. It requires the field to recognize something Davenport's fiction makes unavoidable: environmental destruction is how empire operates. It is not incidental damage but the mechanism itself. When American Studies begins to see the Pacific this way – not as peripheral but as central to understanding US power – the implications shift. Environmental justice and Indigenous sovereignty have stopped being separate concerns and have become the same struggle. Davenport shows us this through fiction. Her narratives expose what official records hide, make visible what tourism conceals, articulate resistance in spaces designed for silence. This is why her work matters for American Studies. Not as illustration of concepts already established, but as an insistence that the field cannot understand colonialism without attending to environmental destruction. American Studies, reformed around this recognition, becomes something different: a project grounded in material accountability and decolonial practice

Conclusion

Davenport's fiction insists that American Studies cannot understand empire without examining how it operates through environmental control. Her narratives move Hawai'i from the margins to the centre, revealing the interconnections between militarization, tourism, and nuclear contamination as expressions of the same colonial logic. This is not a story about the Pacific alone. It is a story about how American power works everywhere – through land theft, resource extraction, and the erasure of Indigenous resistance. American Studies has treated the US as a bounded nation, its culture and identity rooted in mainland geography. Davenport's work breaks that frame. She shows that sovereignty, belonging, and survival are always tied to questions of environmental justice. The field cannot address one without addressing the other. By centring Davenport's fiction – and the ecological perspectives it articulates – American Studies can begin to recognize its own blind spots. It can ask different questions. It can engage with empire not as a historical abstraction but as a material force, still operating, still causing damage. This reorientation matters because scholarship shapes how we understand power. Literature shapes how we resist it. Davenport demonstrates both. Reformed around this recognition, American Studies becomes accountable to the material realities it claims to study.

Footnotes:

[1] The term *hapa*, originating from Native Hawaiian language, translates literally to 'part' or 'mixed'. In her interview, Davenport embraces the term hapa, which she explains "loosely translates to mixed" in Hawaiian, affirming, "I think it's important to emphasize that I'm mixed" (Ralph, 2018)

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