AUTHENTICITY FROM BELOW: The Ethnographic Gift of Ambiguity

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The plain of black lava seemed to stretch forever before us. At this meeting of grassroots community educators and representatives of an elite Native Hawaiian organization, we made our way to an ancestral site closer to the coastline. I walked with ʻĀnela, a grassroots educator, intentionally peeling apart from the group. Referring to the elite organization visiting that day, Kamehameha Schools (what some refer to as "KS" in shorthand), she lowered her voice, looked around cautiously, and said: "If you think about it, and I would never say this openly, but Kamehameha really is like our *aliʻi* [chief] today."

My squinting eyes widened in surprise. "Wow . . . . Yeah, definitely not something to put on blast," I said. Kamehameha Schools was a $15.1 billion trust dedicated to supporting educational programs for Native Hawaiian children, endowed in 1883 by the last will and testament of high chief Bernice Pauahi Bishop. Pauahi was the last royal descendant of the Kamehameha lineage in the Hawaiian Kingdom. Today, as Native Hawaiians do not convene a federally recognized tribal government to manage resources, KS was the largest de facto benefactor of Native Hawaiian education. The organization was also known for sometimes rocky community relations, and quietly criticized for its top-down bureaucracy, business-oriented mind-set and activities, and even exclusivity and

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elitism. When settler interests threatened KS, my community would rally in its defense, rushing such criticisms off stage. Although Pauahi had passed away in 1884, and her position as a beloved chief is undoubted, what did it mean to assert that *the organization* she endowed was a modern-day chief? After the 1893 U.S. military-backed overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy, and the ensuing years of intensifying assimilation and settler colonialism, how could chieftainship endure as such in a 501(c)(3) charitable organization?

ʻĀnela then regrouped, saying, "I know! I know! It's not . . . but you know what I mean though, right?" As a Native Hawaiian and a beneficiary of the trust, I did know, all too well. Why was her statement so tinged with self-conscious trepidation, running the risk of rubbing people the wrong way? And yet, why did it also make sense? We both knew how some might react with outrage at the explicit equating of the institution to our revered chiefs of old. When I began a part-time job at KS corporate headquarters much earlier in 2016, my aunty, who proudly sported KS stickers on her car, half-jokingly told me, "How's it working with the fake Hawaiians?" My mother, an alumna of KS, held her own, more gently coded critiques. My aunty's scandalous accusation of "fake" referenced a historical sentiment that the organization was run by those out of step with the Native Hawaiian community in terms of values, decisions, and class backgrounds. It comes down to a question of authenticity, of when such qualifications can be made un/controversially from within a social field. The contention of controversy indicates a struggle over the very nature of our peoplehood, of defining that which sets us apart from settler society and sets us together as a people. What was at stake was how we dis/agree on what was legitimately "Native Hawaiian": when—or rather, *if*, as I will show—we should draw the line of an Indigenous social institution like chieftainship as legitimately continuous or farcically ruptured by capitalist modernity and colonization.

Amid historical and contemporary forms of assimilation that aim to commensurate Indigenous peoples with settler society, "the elimination of the native *as native*" (Kauanui 2016), how do Native nations discern what we see as defining our peoplehood, our indigeneity? More broadly, how can one understand in concrete terms the contestations over a minoritized group's very self-definition? Rather than taking peoplehood for granted as a presupposed essence, this article foregrounds how peoplehood is fundamentally contested, mediated by concrete social practices, and is therefore empirically analyzable. In other words, this is a question of how groups adjudicate aspects of in/authenticity, legitimacy, and peoplehood through historical change. Some might implicitly assume an internal

coherence to indigeneity, calling on a nation's transhistorical "essence"—like values, epistemology, or ontology—that then forms the anchor of internal authenticity. While authenticity may seem to imply an essence or original, it instead affords understanding how Indigenous actors discern, contest, and maintain our cultural and political distinctiveness. Within the push-and-pull of assimilation-differentiation, I show how Native Hawaiian actors operated in recognition of in/authenticity, maneuvering and creatively acting in the space of *maintained* ambiguity, deploying a shifting and dynamic reassessment of the ground of authenticity for particular social ends. By viewing authenticity from below, such a *practice of ambiguity* constitutes a technique of cultural and national survival that fundamentally recasts authenticity.

The capacious nature of *authenticity* and its shifting referent requires specifying a genealogy to clarify the premise of the concept. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1991, 28) provides a critical provenance of modern notions of authenticity, explaining that, "before the late eighteenth century no one thought that differences between human beings had this kind of moral significance." Early articulators of authenticity, namely, Johann Gottfried Herder, offered that the concept entailed maintaining some essential self, an "inner nature," in the face of conformity and difference (Taylor 1991, 29). I add that when reading the genealogy of authenticity through Herder as a formative articulator, the influence of German Romanticism rings clear: the esteem of a national essence; a reified arrangement of shared language, religion, ethnicity, and culture; and aspirations to purity and an anchoring in ideologized history. For many Indigenous peoples, this framing lays the groundwork for the binds of static cultural authenticity adjudicated by settler societies bestowing conditional recognition (Coulthard 2014; Povinelli 2002). This conceptual vestige emerges in the infamous "invented tradition" debates, originally discussing the British Empire (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), but later cynically casting contemporary iterations of Indigenous tradition as fanciful fabrications or ruptures from a true and pure past (Linnekin 1983; Trask 1991). The valorization of a rigid, quintessential essence contrasts with more pliable, historically produced and contingent notions of heritage.

Taylor's critique of such atomized and rigid authenticity instead argues for an authenticity that is dialogical, social, and depends on distributed notions of the self. In a Hegelian manner, Taylor contends that one's identity is constructed in dialogue with the struggle for recognition with others. While this may seem a more salubrious model of authenticity, such a "politics of recognition" famously locks Indigenous peoples into settler society's bestowal of recognition and judgment

of authenticity (Coulthard 2014; Povinelli 2002). Thinking beyond indigeneity, this idea produces a predicament akin to W. E. B. Du Bois's (1904) classic concept of "double consciousness." The Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard (2014) offers a politics of "resurgence" that eschews recognition to instead turn inward for self-definition and self-actualization. In the process, Indigenous communities can instead look to their own "grounded normativities" of place-based ethics, knowledge, and practices that undergird Indigenous lifeways (Coulthard 2014, 13). This may seem to reassert authenticity, but of an inward-looking type. However, as Coulthard notes, the ground for such self-authentication is itself contested, as the opening vignette shows how the Kamehameha Schools's status of chiefly continuity proves controversial. Further, turning "inward" does not remove the material realities of living in the grasp of settler-colonial, externally imposed notions of recognizing authenticity (Coulthard 2014; Ramones 2024, 576–77). Rather than conceiving of Indigenous peoples as caught between a binary of reified oppositional authenticities (i.e., colonial authenticity and "grounded normativities"), I instead propose examining how we navigate, even wield, different notions of authenticity from below, outlining a practice of ambiguity that forms a means of cultural and national survival.

Did we see traditional institutions like chieftainship or *mana* (power, prestige, generative potency) as authentically enduring or farcically claimed? Scholars have since examined the endurance of cultural forms through frameworks of rearticulation. For example, the Native Hawaiian anthropologist Ty P. Kāwika Tengan (2008a) examines how traditional gender practices and roles are (re)made by contemporary Native Hawaiian men, while other anthropologists have attended to how traditional Indigenous institutions and practices are rearticulated in changing historical conditions (Clifford 2001; Dennison 2012; Howard and Borofsky 1989; Ito 1999; Ka'ili 2017; LiPuma 2000; Turner 1979). Others have similarly eschewed the charge of "invented tradition," endeavoring to explain the "inventiveness" of traditions as "responses" to historical conditions (Sahlins 1993; Theodossopoulos 2013). However, such rearticulation frameworks bypass the question of authenticity. As more than an anthropological concern, authenticity materially impacts modes of allegiance and group-formation, how cultural forms are differentially valorized, and the very self-definitions and imposed definitions of indigeneity reproduced through time. For example, rampant cultural appropriation and exploitation, individuals falsely claiming Indigenous membership, and internal disputes over adhering to shared principles make authenticity an urgent question from below. While authenticity is commonly understood as a dated colonial

imposition, I show how actors mobilized a practice of dis/ambiguating authenticity for making claims, protecting Indigenous interests, and engaging in power struggles both internal and external to the Indigenous polity. Rather than avoiding authenticity as the elephant in the room—for it is a question on the minds of many—I radically re-examine the question and worth of authenticity, only this time from below. Working for years with grassroots educators like ʻĀnela, even helping administer one such program, I was always interested in how we as grassroots Native Hawaiian educators qualified our relationships with elite Native organizations that controlled funding and orchestrated an impressive scale of educational and social engineering. What is at stake across sociopolitical divides if one segment within a social group questions or makes claims on the authenticity of another segment? With KS as a powerful organization in relation to grassroots groups, all circumscribed by settler-colonial domination, ambiguity emerges as a means of protection against settler-imposed definitions of authentic Hawaiianness, also maintaining creative space for *internal* contestation and claims-making.[1]

As an exercise in Indigenous anthropology, I offer an epistemological shift in how to theorize and characterize social institutions as they transform in capitalist modernity. Indeed, this begs an even broader question of how to diachronically understand difference and social (trans)formations, a necessary tool well worn by the hands of many. By exploring the question of authenticity from below, I draw from the contradictions found in ethnographic research to offer what I call the "ethnographic gift of ambiguity" and creative praxis. As more than "decolonizing" anthropological theorization, grassroots Indigenous practices of valuation and action offer a gift of analysis keyed to *mediation*: processes that channel and remake conventionally static categories of in/authenticity and the very bounds of shared peoplehood. Working at the interface of social theory and practice, this "gift of ambiguity" is itself also a testament to the value of ethnography and its attention to concrete practices that mediate contradiction. It is an epistemological shift that reclaims categories from the hands of the theoretician alone and remands it to our interlocutors, not in the name of ambiguity as a vague abstraction, but instead allowing interlocutors' practices to guide theory in seeing how categories—even those as notorious as in/authenticity—can be knowable as *moments* of processes in *motion*, being both itself and its opposite, its coming into being and its passing away.

I begin with how actors themselves saw Polynesian social institutions of chieftainship and mana as enduring rearticulations, albeit with reservations. Actors applied their own organic understandings of "social organization" (Firth

1964), a line I follow to reveal how KS fulfills functional roles of chieftainship and mana. I then explore the reservations that many held in declaring such continuity, that tenor of whispered trepidation in ʻĀnela's voice. By discussing how actors saw KS as falling short of, constrained from, or even contravening against these social institutions, actors brought forward what they held to be undoubtedly *maoli*: a polysemic word used to mean "true," "authentic," and "Indigenous." In this contested field, grassroots actors dexterously operated with degrees of reverence and recognition of authenticity, tempered by how KS fell short of simple continuity, all while remaining anchored in other continuities that they saw as uncontroversially *maoli*. As the Native Hawaiian scholar Lani Teves (2018, 17) observes, "It is more useful to look at the ways that Indigenous peoples deploy authenticity as a shifting set of ideas that work for certain ends, not as a measuring stick." *Maoli* makes for a serious and abiding question on the ground—the stakes are indigeneity itself. In a social cleavage that requires some untangling by those working on contested terrain, how do actors engage this question? Anthropology acknowledges how "social life rests on ambiguities that cannot easily be excised" (Ralph 2014, 17), so what if ambiguity is itself a self-conscious social institution for interlocutors? The "ethnographic gift of ambiguity" explains how actors operate in recognition of in/authenticity, creatively acting in the space of maintained possibility and indeterminacy. I must heavily emphasize that this ambiguity is *not* a vague metaphor that acquiesces to a phenomenon of being "too complex," outside the domain of structural knowability and systematic reason, or an evasive perspectivism of plural authenticities. Instead, it is a lesson of ambiguity as concretely knowable in a larger, structured holism: not just holding contradictory truths of in/authenticity but also attending more decisively to how each becomes the other, as one acts on the other in a dynamic unity, at once including both itself and its opposite—all within precise historical conditions. The ambiguity I theorize is not the end point of indecisive critique or some unknowable black box floating beyond action and thought. Instead, ambiguity here means a knowable mediating practice that emerges from, and acts on, concrete social contradictions. In the forge of social practice, institutions and practices seen as inauthentic can be recaptured or corrected as authentic, which entails that those codified as normatively authentic can also be called into question. Grassroots cultural practices seen as authentic can act on institutions or practices deemed inauthentic, while institutions or practices with questioned authenticity can aim to exercise control of grassroots practices and values seen as authentic. The inauthentic contains traces of the authentic, and the authentic contains traces of

the inauthentic—moments of a dynamic process. This, I then explain, offers an epistemology of mediation to understand *maoli* as a contested practice in motion.

For actors on the ground, this creative practice of ambiguity offers a concrete survival strategy: an appropriation of authenticity from below that prevents us from being pinned down by colonial authenticity, also allowing us to operationalize our notions of *maoli* in our own ways and to our own ends. I will show how *maoli* is a practice and epistemological disposition, deployed to make claims, effect change, and to protect and expand indigeneity in a settler-colonial context. Given its role as a survival strategy, disclosing extensive details could indeed turn this ethnographic gift of ambiguity into a dangerous gift. A Hawaiian proverb states, *mai kaulaʻi wale i ka iwi o nā kūpuna*, meaning, "do not dry out the bones of the ancestors," prescribing caution in discussing such intimate affairs (Pukui 1993, No. 2069). I therefore refrain from adjudicating authenticity and elaborating examples in detail, exercising "ethnographic refusal" to protect the creative practice of ambiguity (Simpson 2007).

CONTINUITY

ʻĀnela's statement of chiefly continuity could easily be misread as a simple reference to Kamehameha Schools' namesake: King Kamehameha I, who united the Hawaiian Islands into a single kingdom in 1810, and ancestor of chief Pauahi. However, ''Ānela immediately explained how KS stewarded lands, served as a cultural and community leader, and provided for, even literally "fed," the Hawaiian people, much like our chiefs of old. She spoke with reverence and deference, albeit with self-conscious and hushed restraint, noting the chiefly mantle that the organization carried. As was common for KS, we even began the day with a chant honoring Pauahi and her high lineage. When encountering KS, either through funding applications, reports, official visits, or meetings with representatives, I and interlocutors held a dual awareness that these were representatives of an institution, yet we were also keenly aware that on a deeper level, it was our sacred "collective inheritance."[2] As more than simple organic sentiment, how did KS function in continuity as a "collective inheritance" of our past?

Interlocutors like ʻĀnela held their own working consciousness of what the early anthropologist of Polynesia, Raymond Firth (1964), called "social organization." Rather than rigid notions of social "structure," Firth's pliable model of social *organization* centers the dynamism of social groups, while rendering the systematic ordering of action, the orientation of decision-making individuals, and the arrangements of relations to particular social ends. Grassroots interlocutors

and KS staff noted how the institution held the estate of chief Pauahi, including more than 360,000 acres of inherited lands and billions of dollars in financial investments and holdings.[3] Generating hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue, estate funding flowed into K-12 schools, preschools, grassroots cultural education, community resource centers, language-immersion programs, and land restoration. Holding this communal resource, individuals within KS chose to redistribute such funding and support into an impressive portfolio of programs serving communities. Along the way, individuals remained committed to stewarding lands, sacred sites, and ecosystems to the highest standard. While this might be considered a drain on endowment resources, it was broadly unquestioned that lands must be cared for with an eye to ancestral obligations and future generations. Although KS held the legal title to lands, a subtle but important difference obtained in the meaning ascribed to these lands. KS staff, and even members of grassroots organizations, would refer to it as *ʻāina Pauahi*, the lands of Pauahi, or *ʻāina hoʻoilina*, a double entendre that references how Pauahi inherited the lands from her ancestors, while the lands also stood for our collective inheritance as a people. "Look over there! Hawaiian lands *still* in Hawaiian hands," said one community educator while giving a tour of her place-based education program to federal funders. She pointed to an adjacent KS land parcel, verdant and well-kept, and her message was understood without being explicit: amid the mass dispossession of Hawaiian lands, the retention of lands by KS stood out as an unbroken lineage of chiefly landholding.

While this may seem like the work of any well-meaning philanthropic foundation, the Polynesian social institution of chieftainship functionally endured in rearticulated form. Very early on, Firth (2011, 369) noted that in Polynesian social organization, chiefs held resources, especially land, in communal "trust." Different from European feudalism, the chief redistributed *communally* held resources to the community of beneficiaries: "He [*sic*] was a kind of channel through which wealth flowed, concentrating it only to pour it out freely again" (Firth 2011, 120). Although KS resources derived from capital accumulation, Firth (2011, 119) even posited that chiefs "acted as a kind of capitalist" to accumulate and redistribute wealth, noting how a chief must show adequate wealth *and* generosity. Economically at least, KS functioned as a chief of sorts.

Chieftainship, arguably found within KS, did not end on a functional economic level. George Marcus (1989, 188) argues that chieftainship is often a "synecdoche" for Polynesian societies. Constituting more than a politico-economic function, he notes, chiefs also held a "mystical" role of mediating with the divine

and begetting mana for the people. This is another point at which KS starkly differs from an ordinary philanthropic foundation. Each year, KS beneficiaries across Hawai'i gather for Founder's Day, venerating Pauahi through chants, song, offerings, dance, and prayer. At one such ceremony in 2021, a massive portrait displayed chief Pauahi receiving rays of light from the heavens. Her image stood watch above the proceedings, at the front of the crowd and beneath the seal of Kamehameha Schools, which depicted Kamehameha I holding a spear and his other hand outstretched. Her portrait was flanked by two *kāhili*, long poles capped by thousands of feathers meticulously tied into a plume, a traditional emblem of royalty. Two students stood before the platform, dressed in royal guard uniforms and pith helmets. Throughout the program, students offered chants, reflections, and songs in honor of Pauahi. As more than a yearly occurrence, each morning at KS headquarters, a group of staff would begin the workday before a traditional *'ahu* (stone altar) topped with offerings of *lei*. After a series of chants and songs, we would file back into the air-conditioned building to begin the workday. In the hallway outside my cubicle, like at many other KS facilities across Hawai'i, hung a portrait of Pauahi, its frame adorned by *lei* of fragrant *maile*, a sweet-scented native vine. Even outside of these marked ceremonial practices of chiefly mana, KS and Pauahi incarnated as emblems of honor and pride. From the highly coveted Kamehameha Schools rear window car sticker, to shirts and social media declaring "Pauahi Built" or "Forever Indebted," Pauahi and KS signified connections of material beneficence and ardent reverence.

When KS was subject to potential settler state dispossession or interference, a galvanized community arose in defense. In the early 2000s, KS was sued for its preference policy of benefiting Native Hawaiian children, as the founder had prescribed in her will. While the courts eventually upheld this policy, the community mobilized in strong support of KS. Earlier, in 1963, the state legislature proposed a "forced leasehold conversion," compelling KS to sell residential land parcels to those who had only leased these lands. Community members marched to 'Iolani Palace, the seat of the Hawaiian Crown, encircling the adjacent settler-state legislature with burning torches (King and Roth 2006, 60–61). In the 2000s episode, Hawaiians swiftly moved to protect our "collective inheritance" (Kauanui 2008, 14). In 1963, KS "stood as a kind of Hawaiian fortress, real and symbolic, land and *'āina*, a sacred link to the past to be defended at all costs" (King and Roth 2006, 60).

Although chiefs can become a contemporary symbol of cultural survival (Firth 1979), the evident reverence, the almost totemic nature of KS, indexes

the enduring rearticulation of mana, another mainstay of classical anthropology. Commonly defined as power or prestige, mana proves more complex in its dimensions of generative potency (the ability to beget abundance), a stative verb denoting efficacy and fulfilment, and its derivation from both divine genealogy and accrued through proper action (Keesing 1984; Shore 1989). The Native Hawaiian archaeologist Kekuewa Kikiloi (2012, 4) defines mana as "ritual power," usefully emphasizing the role of chiefs who mediate with the divine through ritual, thereby generating growth and abundance. Mana carried economic and socio-religious functions, signifying the begetting of abundance and the mantle of sacredness. Such mana was actualized in ceremony and quotidian practices of reverence and restriction (Kameʻeleihiwa 1992; Kikiloi 2012; Marcus 1989; Valeri 1985). Although there is no ruling contemporary chief, and the Hawaiian social order has undergone massive transformation since first contact in 1778, the practices and valorizations of KS make for one of many rearticulations of the traditional form and function of mana in the twenty-first century (see Tomlinson and Tengan 2016). I was surprised when, near the start of fieldwork, I found it necessary to visit Pauahi's tomb on Founder's Day. I was not a KS graduate, and therefore not socialized with regular practices of veneration. I was also working with grassroots groups that quietly held serious questions about the adherence of KS to Hawaiian principles. I drove to the royal mausoleum, planning to see the many offerings laid at her grave on Founder's Day. On arrival, my mentality of observation fell away, and I found myself compelled to visit in a ceremonial mode. I reflected on a previous moment in my life, when I had opened a letter from KS awarding me a scholarship, seeing the acceptance notice under the proud seal of Kamehameha. It was my first time receiving Pauahi's chiefly provision, and it felt more like a relationship than a scholarship. When I visited her grave that day at the start of my fieldwork, I found myself thanking her. In my family, and in the many community programs with which I worked, the chief lived in her provision for the people, reciprocated by due respect and gratitude.

And yet reverence had its limits amid the complexities of Native Hawaiian life. In the 1990s, for example, a famous saga of KS trustee mismanagement, private interest, misconduct, and dictatorial management splashed across local and even national news media (King and Roth 2006). Rather than suing KS or making settler state intervention a headline demand, community movements for accountability occurred along particular Hawaiian logics. The Kamehameha ʻOhana, composed of graduates and teachers, organized multiple marches calling for change at KS, with the most notable demonstration marching from Mauna

ʻAla Royal Mausoleum, Pauahi's burial site, to KS headquarters. In doing so, they symbolically leveraged accountability of KS to its chiefly founder and lineage, implicitly suggesting that trustees had turned away from this *kuleana* (relational responsibility). Instances such as this one show how actors worked within the arrangements of Hawaiian social organization, deploying established relational responsibilities, drawing from cultural protocols, and reiterating a common goal of pono (proper, righteous) chiefly action. One demonstrator who had a friend within the KS administration remembered that event clearly. His friend implored that a trustee go to the mausoleum to apologize and call for unity. Instead, he explained to me: "They sat on the second floor and rooftop of Kawaiahaʻo Plaza [the headquarters]. When the people gathered there, they were taking pictures of any staff members who were in the crowd—who were aligning with the *enemy*. It was that crazy. And those folks had to survive that." Even in such a social drama, rearticulations of traditional chieftainship occurred, such that "public opinion acted as a decided force of regulation, at times latent, at others manifest" (Firth 2011, 279). While some Native Hawaiians protested against trustees, Native Hawaiian counter-protesters asked how one "can bite the hand that feeds you," even calling Hawaiian protestors *haole* (foreign/white) (King and Roth 2006, 239). From these incidents emerges a common split-consciousness, even a wider social cleavage, of criticism and allegiance to this preeminent Native Hawaiian institution and symbol. In other words, this constituted a struggle over what defines a shared peoplehood.

DISCONTINUITY

This split-consciousness, an ambiguity toward authenticity, was a consistent phenomenon alongside clarity about what was unquestionably *maoli*. ʻĀnela's comment provoked not only my thinking but also discussion. I broached the question of enduring chieftainship with dozens of grassroots interlocutors engaged in education, land restoration, health services, and cultural revival. They neither flatly rejected nor uncritically affirmed the proposition that "KS is our *aliʻi* [chief] today." They would qualify their position as, "yes, but," or "I can see that, but . . ." or, "not really, but I guess in some ways . . . ." What followed was a litany of specific examples or general statements about what historical conditions foreclosed on KS and its decision-making, what prevented it from being a seamless continuity of chieftainship. They did not refer to the issue of there being no physical ruling chief, but instead to *how* KS fulfilled, or did not fulfill, its social organizational role as chief. To be clear, Pauahi's status as a chief

was unquestioned, while opinions of KS's status would fluctuate over historical time and circumstance. Criticism ranged from KS pivoting to focus on elite programs, shifting priorities that made for unstable funding, certain investments and real estate deals, or even its educational approach. For the latter, a group of Hawaiian-language immersion school educators once joked with me that the Oʻahu campus of KS was not a "*Hawaiian* school" but a "school *for* Hawaiians," referencing what they saw as cultural education that could be deepened. Then of course, there was the organization's own history of assimilationist programs, which was noted in the 2022 Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report (Baker 2010; Goodyear-Kaʻōpua 2014a; Tengan 2008b). Add to this that a chief was ideally sovereign, and any chiefly institution was now constrained by U.S. occupation and settler colonialism. For example, the settler state courts appointed a so-called Court *Master* who regularly reviewed trustees' finance management and educational outcomes. In each of these criticisms, actors saw some KS decisions as contravening how a chief should or could act, deviating from cultural principles, not meeting obligations, or conceding to the dominant settler society. These quiet criticisms emerged frequently among the grass roots, but when KS found itself under siege by settler interests, the community would unite in support of the institution.

My friend Lani helped run a place-based cultural education program for youth on Hawaiʻi Island which depended on a mixture of KS and philanthropic funding, and she often brought KS students to the program site. One day we talked about a KS land development, where she suggested they could build communities around practices and relationships of communal traditional agriculture. Instead, she saw them capitulating to settler state norms of nuclear family housing and economic realities like the need for the project to generate profit. The conversation then unspooled into the many ways that KS could be bolder, more *maoli* to our principles. She took a bite of her sandwich and looked away from me, sat in silence, then said: "You know, why do they [KS] care what America thinks? Fuck America. I just don't get it." Knowing her for years, I understood that "America" was her stand-in for the systems that constrained and alienated us. I then explained all the rules and necessities to which KS as a 501(c)(3) was beholden. For her, KS could be a true leader, acting from bold political and cultural conviction for our people. Without using the word "*aliʻi*" (chief), she implicitly recognized its functional position and the cultural mantle of chieftainship. The issue was not inherent to KS itself, but contained in the biases and constraints placed on decision-makers; the institution's potential was debilitated by the material and ideological binds of the settler state and capitalist political

economy. In other words, each limiting factor emerged from the exigencies of KS survival according to capitalist logics and the dominance of settler institutions and standards. Some actors viewed these constraints not only as external structural factors but even assigned culpability to specific figures within KS. One educator blamed the CEO and vice presidents for a massive reorganization that saw some community programs "sunset." A retiree of KS had sympathy for leadership and trustees, recognizing the fine line they had to walk. She explained how the older generation of the overtly assimilationist era, especially those who succeeded in business and administration, did not have the cultural groundings that younger generations had today. She compared them to an Albizia tree that does not have deep roots and is easily dislodged, as opposed to grassroots practitioners with intergenerational commitments—people who will "not be moved." Interlocutors saw the potential of KS as a contemporary chief of sorts, depending on and holding deep respect for what KS represented, but they also noted how a series of constraints prevented seamless continuity.

UNDOUBTED AUTHENTICITY

One grassroots cultural practitioner, Nanea, had spent decades building an oasis to revive Indigenous knowledge, lifeways, and practices. Her program site was carefully insulated from outside influence, so that Indigenous principles could be lived in a zone of reviving traditional agriculture, medicines, and ecological stewardship. Stepping outside such a protected zone posed a challenge. As she told me in reference to elite organizations like KS: "We put our own people in these systems wanting them to ascend to positions of power, but then they *become* the system." How, then, could they anchor themselves to *maoli* within such countervailing systems? At her grassroots project performing land restoration, the revival of ancestral knowledge, and cultural education, there was no doubt regarding their foundations and vision. In a few acres, she and her collaborators had restored Native ecosystems with ancestral plants, taught youth land-based practices and ancestral knowledge, and provided free resources to the surrounding community. I asked Nanea how they sustained such an oasis while literally surrounded by encroaching invasive species and the pressures of capitalist and settler institutions. Her answer's decisiveness and specificity surprised me: ceremony.

> I think that's all part of that "holding space," where there's a lot of spiritual work that we engage in through ceremony. We don't really talk about it a lot on our public, outward-facing persona. That is a foundational aspect of our work—ceremonies regularly throughout the year.

Nanea then detailed how ceremony required planning, training, and setting aside the pressures of capitalism's compressed space-time. A crucial part of ceremony was the maintenance of *kapu* or *tapu*, which English borrowed as "taboo," here meaning the restrictions that maintain fields of sacredness. She then casually said, as if it was nothing profound:

> Ceremony is unquestioned, like, there's no question about rescheduling that. That's set . . . that's on one level an understanding that we have a big grand vision and it's bigger than us. It's multigenerational and includes our *kūpuna* [ancestors, both human and nonhuman], our *ʻaumākua* [deified ancestors], our *akua* [elemental personification, deities]. And so, we have to engage them in the work. I don't think we would be where we are now if not for that.

The resolute commitment to ceremony grounded the group's activities in an authenticity that, as Nanea saw it, protected them from hegemonic forces and ideologies. In regular ceremonial engagement with traditional practices, relationships, and worldviews, actors re-grounded themselves in what they saw as *maoli*: ancestors and the land.

While grassroots interlocutors heavily qualified questions of authenticity regarding KS, they had clear visions of what was undoubtedly authentic, unquestionably *maoli*: ancestral knowledge (*ʻike kūpuna*) and *ʻāina* (land). Following the massive transformations since first contact in 1778, and especially after the Second Hawaiian Renaissance that began in the 1960s, Hawaiian society has held fast to these foundations as anchors of authenticity, while these ideals are themselves historically produced (Trask 1987, 127). As much more than "land," *ʻāina* is often etymologized as "that which feeds," combining the gerund *ʻai* (food, to eat) with the nominalizing suffix, *-na*. The concept encompasses a congelation of ethical relations, practices, and knowledge derived from a specific place (Kameʻeleihiwa 1992; Osorio 2002; Goodyear-Kaʻōpua 2014b), what Coulthard (2014) calls "grounded normativities." *ʻĀina* refers to both the material substance of land and its status as an ideological foundation and genealogical superior. *ʻĀina* holds an elder position in our cosmogonic genealogies, and so Native Hawaiians hold the duty to care for lands in return for its abundance. Interlocutors and scholars often cite the proverb, *he aliʻi ka ʻāina, he kauwā ke kanaka*, meaning that the land is chief, and people are its servants (Pukui 1993, No. 531). Ancestral knowledge is taught to emerge from the relationships, accountabilities, and practices on and with *ʻāina*, constituted from long histories of being in relation to, and building expertise about, the natural world (Kanahele-Mossman and Karides 2021;

Nu'uhiwa 2019). In this case, land was the undisputed chief and source of authentic knowledge and conduct. Amid the entanglement with countervailing systems, Nanea saw ceremony, the mediation of ancestral knowledge and relations with land, as a way to bind practice to a deeper authenticity. It is no coincidence that *'aha* means "ceremony," "gathering of people," and also a cord used for binding. Ceremony is also of course how mana is made to circulate and beget abundance, even in the twenty-first century. Here, mana was unquestioned in its persistence.

Of the different criticisms that actors had of KS, one was that the organization would commit to Indigenous principles in words, but that actions would sometimes deviate from such a vision. One young educator, criticizing another Hawaiian institution, phrased the phenomenon as, "*maoli* in words, *haole* in action," meaning Indigenous and authentic in words, and foreign/white in action. One day I asked an elder mentor about this question of adhering to "Hawaiian values," even how we conceive of them. As usual, he answered with a story: "Forgive me. I don't mean to offend anyone. It always just makes me cringe a teeny bit when I hear, *'Alooooooha*, the value of the day—the 'Hawaiian' value of the day, is *lōōōōōkahi* [unity, togetherness]." The intonation he imitated was familiar to those from Hawai'i, as he mimicked a kitschy tourism stage host's performative showmanship. In his cheeky yet serious tone, authenticity stalked in the background of the story. He continued:

> You know? I had a little discussion with [that man] once when he was doing a lecture in one of the hotel resorts, their major resort. And he said, "If you're in the aloha biz,"[4] excuse me, [he said] "if you're in the visitor business, you're in the aloha business."
>
> And after the discussion, I said, "That's not a fair thing to say, because aloha is not a business, it's a way of life." *Lōkahi* [unity, harmony], it's not a value; *lōkahi* is a word that describes a value, but it must be lived. So, it's not enough to say, *lōkahi*, *ha'aha'a* [humility], and all these things. They're just words unless we live them.

Later in the conversation, he circled back to this contention:

> It's important to be able to *maintain*, and I hate to use the word, because of the conversation earlier. I'm not saying a word is the values, but we need to live and maintain those values that have been passed down over the generations, or we lose *your* identity as a *kanaka* [Hawaiian person].

The stakes of this story were indeed high, as my own "identity" as a Native Hawaiian hinged on properly conceiving of our "values" as lived, relational practices, rather than mere static representations. In his thinking, words could be co-opted, while concrete relationships and practices tied to ancestral norms provided a more unshakeable foundation. Much like Nanea, he felt at ease in selecting what was *maoli* and proper grounding. The undoubtedly *maoli*, however, shared a social field with institutions like KS. Interlocutors could speak at length about the rocky relationships and criticisms of such institutions, yet they would defend these institutions when they found themselves under settler scrutiny, maintaining a respect for the chiefly institution itself.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC GIFT OF AMBIGUITY

Kanaka Maoli is a term commonly used by Native Hawaiians to self-identify, literally meaning "genuine, Indigenous, true, and authentic people." One interlocutor, Hema, helped run a program that straddled Western enterprise and Indigenous education. His work pulled him between calls with institutional funders and ceremonial activity. Frequently encountering the need to discern between what was *maoli* and what was not, he would often say that "*maoli* is just a word for authentic!" In Hawaiian, the word *maoli* simultaneously means authentic, real, and Indigenous. But in English, rather than invoking *Indigenous*, which he recognized as deeply contested and open to co-optation, he preferred to think in terms of *authenticity*. *Authenticity*, a word scholars loath, was for him less loaded and more straightforward than *Indigenous*, while *Indigenous* is a word that sits comfortably in the academic lexicon.

When he made this comment about *authenticity*, others would nod along noting how clear the repositioning was to them. While scholars may try to avoid the contentious topic altogether, this practitioner indeed preferred it. For him, authenticity was an ongoing creative practice of self-critically selecting and maintaining what is "authentic" to our place-based and ancestrally transmitted indigeneity. The question of authenticity is therefore a primary concern "from below." Anthropology should not resign it to the dustbin of problematic concerns, but instead strive to understand how it operates for communities on the ground (Theodossopoulos 2013).

Although actors had a clear view of what they considered undoubtedly authentic, this is not to defer the question of authenticity away from KS and to another field of activity. To do so would maintain the quandary of how to approach authenticity, reifying other domains as true and essentialized authenticity. Rather, I depict a contingent *shared* field of contesting authenticity itself. Grassroots community members exercised both constrained criticism and reserved reverence, all

while holding fast to what *we* saw as authentic. Whether calling for more cultural education, objecting to land development, criticizing mismanagement, or even pressuring KS to halt agricultural leases to Monsanto, community members drew from the obligations of ancestral knowledge, *lived* relational values (as opposed to values of mere "words"), and beckoned KS to act in accordance with the obligations of a *pono* (righteous, balanced) leader. In pressures for accountability and change, grassroots community members had a clear vision of shared social goals, imploring individuals within KS toward certain calibrations of decision-making (Firth 1964, 2011). They deployed that which they saw as authentic to make claims on KS. The institution itself, as I have explained, was assessed as having a constrained, if not contested, authentic continuity. Ancestral knowledge and proper relations with and from *ʻāina*, fountainheads of undisputed authenticity, were mobilized as "checks" on KS, pushing and pulling the organization toward the behavior of a proper chief. In this sense, the authenticity of KS was decidedly not ambi*valent*, as the grass roots had clear and well-defined visions for change.

The authenticity of KS was *ambiguous*. Far from static, it was a shifting and dynamic assessment and reassessment of the ground of authenticity, in which actors deployed and contested various loci of authenticity to more thoroughly indigenize the institution. That is why ʻĀnela's whispered comment could not be said so explicitly in public; by remaining unspoken, it maintained the creative space of ambiguity. Publicly proclaiming it would fix it in stone, denying the possibility of authenticity as a fluid practice. Embattlement by settler-colonial domination is indeed another factor that tightens our lips from pronouncing a Native Hawaiian institution as diverging from authentic values. Ambiguity, therefore, prevents us from being pinned down by colonial authenticity, allowing us to continue operationalizing our notions of authenticity in our own ways. Put differently, authenticity from below is re-appropriated as a tool of survival and internal deliberation. In their relationships with KS, actors managed to work in reverence and recognition of the chiefly lineage of KS, while also remaining anchored to what they saw as undoubtedly *maoli*. These anchors allowed KS's ambiguity as chief and convener of mana to not constitute threats to an insecure crisis of authenticity, instead allowing actors to be steadfastly secure in engaging this open-ended process of institutional change. In *Arguing with Tradition*, the legal anthropologist Justin Richland (2008, 157) posits that "it is necessary to hold these contradictory, even paradoxical, notions of cultural difference at once," reducing them to neither resistance nor domination, and instead seeing "them as *potentialities* that can and do emerge at the forward edge of the politics of native culture." In navigating this "forward edge" of Native culture, *maoli* was itself a social instrument of accountability and transformation.

The question of authenticity is of course famously vexed in anthropology, so why not drop the concern entirely? Another such contention, also emerging from Indigenous Oceania, asks why commoners would work for and give their products to chiefs, a practice that could devolve into accusations of chiefly despotism. Jane Collier (2004, 44–45) intervened by offering: "The point, of course, is not that it is wrong to ask whether commoners in chiefdoms are exploited by their chiefs, but rather to recognize that this question is ours, not theirs." Building on this thoughtful course correction, I argue that authenticity is indeed a grassroots question that also offers profound lessons for anthropology and Indigenous studies. Its stakes on the ground are indeed high, especially for a people who self-define as *maoli* in a complex colonial terrain of in/authenticities. Authenticity is not just a colonial confinement, as is commonly understood; appropriated from below, it is a crucial means of survival, a means of discernment that maintains our difference amid pressures of co-optation and commensuration (Ramones 2023). Recall Hema, the practitioner who preferred to think with the term *authentic*, as opposed to *Indigenous*. Rather than casting aside or repeating the quarrels of "invented tradition," I aim to recalibrate the question to how it is lived on the ground.

The undergirding idea of authenticity shows itself to be an enduring issue in need of careful attention. Instead of casting aside in/authenticity, I argue for a radical re-engagement of the concept. In the case of KS and the institutions of chieftainship and mana, the ethnographic gift of ambiguity provides nuance to these questions, illuminating how actors were at ease in holding the contradictions of in/authenticity as each acted on the other in a dynamic unity, simultaneously being both itself and its opposite. This differs from other conceptions of authenticity that, I argue, emerge from a mode of metaphysical thinking prone to reification. As Friedrich Engels (2020, 57) writes:

> To the metaphysician, things and their mental images, ideas, are isolated, to be considered one after the other and apart from each other, fixed, rigid objects of investigation given once for all. He [*sic*] thinks in absolutely unmediated antitheses. . . . For him [*sic*] a thing either exists or does not exist; a thing cannot at the same time be itself and something else. Positive and negative absolutely exclude one another; cause and effect stand in a rigid antithesis one to the other. . . . In the presence of individual things it forgets their connections; because in the presence of their existence it forgets their coming into being and passing away; because in their state of rest it forgets their motion. It cannot see the woods for the trees.

More rigid notions of authenticity prove thoroughly metaphysical: static, isolated from historical formation and transformation, antithetical to inauthenticity, and by definition excluding how that which is authentic can simultaneously include the inauthentic, and vice versa. It cannot grasp motion, cannot understand how (in)authenticity can come into being and at the same time pass away. The antitheses of in/authenticity stand in calcified and exclusive opposition, as there lacks the mediation of practice. It is therefore no wonder that, when presented with such a rigid choice, one might avoid the question of authenticity as problematic. But given its importance on the ground, how does one engage this question?

Some have ventured into authenticity with innovative models that reinvigorate the field while remaining attentive to necessary nuances. Introducing a special journal issue on the topic of authenticity, Dimitrios Theodossopoulos (2013) offers a fresh approach to the question. "Simultaneous authenticities" opens the possibility of considering multiple authenticities on the ground, with a marked focus on how actors themselves negotiate processes of contradictory authentication. "I do not see the binary logic of authenticity as a trap, but as an invitation to change perspectives, compare one singular and essentialist view of tradition with another, and unpack the local meaningfulness and tactical rhetoric such singular visions of tradition entail," writes Theodossopoulos (2013, 347). This inventive approach opens space to explore how different strains of authenticity share a social field. How, then, does the ambiguity for which I argue build on this framework? Simultaneous authenticities maintain multiple binaries or regimes of in/authenticity, which can defer the question of authenticity to the recursive multiple. In other words, binary in/authenticity is maintained when it can instead be directly problematized, with theoretical and methodological implications. Taking authenticity for granted, even in possible simultaneous multiples, wields multiple perspectives to maintain the metaphysical structure of mutually exclusive categories of in/authenticity. This presupposes that local notions are similarly "singular and essentialist" (Theodossopoulos 2013, 347), which is expressly not the case for those who acted in the ambiguity of KS as an in/authentic chiefly succession and convener of mana. Different from perspectivist valuations of in/authenticity across simultaneous actors, even a single actor could comfortably hold and operate from an ambiguity of in/authenticities. In refraining from public or even private final judgment, actors eschewed the rigidity of authenticity itself, to instead maintain a space of creative activity. Rather than taking authenticity as a metaphysical given, of in/authentic antitheses even in simultaneous multiples, the ethnographic gift of ambiguity provides a dialectical way to grasp the *movement* of authenticity itself in a larger holism, its coming into being and passing away, at once including both itself and its opposite, and homing in on the practices that mediate its remaking.

The ethnographic gift of ambiguity provides a dialectical—as opposed to metaphysical—means of social analysis. Kamehameha Schools can be *both* inauthentic *and* authentic in the dynamic process of practice, not isolated but imbricated with other poles of authenticity that are put to work on the institution. From this standpoint, chieftainship endures in rearticulated form while withering from its traditional ideal, and mana both actively circulates while sitting stagnant. Even beyond this context, the gift of ethnographic ambiguity provides helpful methodological insight for a broad array of social questions, including the very self-definitions of a group. In this case, different from simplistic assertions that Indigenous forms are transhistorical and intact, or pronounced dead and placed in a field museum, or even cast as rearticulation while decentering the question of authenticity, ethnographic ambiguity reframes authenticity not as a category but as a practice. When approaching the authenticity of contemporary Indigenous social institutions, or even indigeneity, perhaps the true question is how authenticity itself makes for an Indigenous social institution.

ABSTRACT

Authenticity is a pressing issue for any group attempting to maintain distinctiveness in contexts of change, domination, or assimilation. For Indigenous communities in particular, authenticity carries the colonial mantle of codifying what constitutes legitimate "tradition," leading scholars to instead reject the concept. However, authenticity constitutes an urgent question on the ground. This article argues for radically re-engaging authenticity from below. Focusing on social institutions of chieftainship and mana in a Native Hawaiian royal estate organization, this article examines how actors exercised a restrained recognition of authentic continuity alongside constrained criticisms of ruptured inauthenticity. In a broader shared field, actors identified and operationalized other loci of undisputed authenticity. Directly confronting authenticity, I offer the "ethnographic gift of ambiguity," locating actors' ease in holding in/authenticity as each acted on the other in a dynamic unity, at once including both itself and its opposite, and mediated by practice. Authenticity is itself an Indigenous form of discernment and action, recalibrated as a practice of maintained ambiguity.

[indigeneity; authenticity; tradition; chieftainship; mana; Hawai'i]

NOTES

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1. This framework is consistent with a Manchester School approach intended "to concentrate particularly upon the situational selection of allegiances and hence of modes of behavior, choices generated by the organization of 'class' and 'tribe', and, ultimately, by the overarching structure imposed by the dominant white group" (Kuper 1973, 190).
2. J. Kēhaulani Kauanui (2008, 14), reacting to a court ruling that upheld the KS legal preference to provide for Native Hawaiian children, uses this term to characterize community solidarity.
3. Given the embattled position of KS, I exercise considerable "ethnographic refusal" to protect the institution (Simpson 2007).
4. *Aloha* is a complex word that denotes love, respect, kindness, or compassion.

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