

Hawai‘i: “GMO Ground Zero”

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Introduction: Resistance is Fertile

In September 2013, thousands of residents on the rural island of Kaua‘i (population 65,000) marched on its County Council Chambers chanting “aloha ‘āina,”¹ “pass the bill,” and “stop poisoning us, the garden island’s had enough,” marking the largest public demonstration in the island’s history. Under the banners of doctors and nurses, teachers, unions, mothers, Native Hawaiians, farmers, environmentalists and surfers, the event united diverse participation around demands for greater regulatory protections against pesticide² use on the island by the world’s largest chemical companies. Five weeks later, the Kaua‘i County Council passed unprecedented local legislation mandating pesticide disclosure, buffer zones, and a health and environmental study on the impacts of Dow, DuPont, BASF and Syngenta’s GMO (genetically modified organism) field testing and seed growing operations. Battles have since reached new intensity on other Hawaiian islands as the industry also marshals its immense resources to discipline the eruption of politics back into the existing order (Badiou 2005).

While social science scholarship has explored the regimes and interests that structure the development and use of GM crop technology and resulting socio-ecological impacts, little of this literature has originated from or paid attention to the places where genetically engineered seeds first come to life—i.e., the fields and soils that mark their origins in global chains of capitalist production

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This article evolved out of papers given at Left Forum 2013 and Social Movements, Resistance and Social Change in New Zealand 2014. Thank you to participants in those conversations, and to two anonymous reviewers for their very thoughtful comments.

¹ Though most typically translated as “love for land,” aloha ‘āina is a deeply spiritual and distinctly political concept with a long history in Hawaiian anti-colonial struggle (Silva 2004). Problematically, this is not always well-understood by current non-indigenous activists.

² Including both herbicides and insecticides.

and accumulation. From the site of what activists call “GMO ground zero,” in this article I outline: 1) the capitalist-colonial context of the chemical+seed+biotechnology industry’s occupation of Hawai‘i; 2) struggles for environmental justice in regards to this pesticide-intensive industry, including how depoliticization operates through discursive narratives that map onto wider ideological contours of capital today; and 3) emergent potentialities of resistance that are also bound up in complexity and contradiction.

I trace immanent possibility, though I am also admittedly uneasy about what happens when environmental and economic justice are not wholly connected in struggle, and about the conflicts that erupt between protection of livelihoods and protection of earth/life when there is a scarcity of radical vision about what we could and should be fighting for. I offer critique as an activist-researcher committed to expanding liberatory possibility and entirely in the spirit of co-laboring to cultivate, rather than to reject, seeds of emancipatory futures where they are attempting to bud. Rather than claim superior observer knowledge, I am embedded in the “process of collective wondering and wandering that is not afraid to admit that the question of how to move forward is always uncertain, difficult, and never resolved in easy answers that are eternally correct” (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007, 11).

Colonialism, Capitalist Agriculture, and Chemical Companies in the Islands

The establishment of a sugar plantation economy in Hawai‘i in the 1800s was the colonial force that most fully pulled the islands into processes of global capital. Death and disease, extractive sandalwood and whaling industries, the snare of debt, and foreign military incursions onto the islands’ shores, all radically disrupted and reorganized Hawaiian society, and created the conditions for enclosure of the commons and the subsequent development of “King Sugar”³ (Osorio 2002; Kame‘eleihiwa 1992; Kent 1993). Western missionaries and capitalist interests (often one and the same) advocated that land privatization would assist in gaining recognition from other nations and melded morality with the logic of profit to argue that exclusive ownership would inspire lazy and licentious Hawaiian commoners to work and restore a population decimated by disease (Beechert

³ Widely referred to as such for its dominance over the political, economic, and natural landscape.

1985; Banner 2005). Decades of debate and imperial maneuverings preceded the codification of private property in Western-style law, which ultimately dismantled communal modes of production based on managed sharing of the commons, and resulted in a massive transfer of resources and political power away from Hawaiian commoners (Osorio 2002; Kame‘eleihiwa 1992). As the sophisticated agricultural production systems of Hawaiians were being systematically displaced and ideologically denigrated, the Pacific nation was transformed into an exporter of commodity crops and an importer of plantation field workers and consumer goods. Emboldened by and seeking to secure their accumulating wealth and power, in the last decade of the nineteenth century factions of the white elite, in tandem with U.S. military interests, orchestrated the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. While not without tremendous struggle by those dispossessed (Silva 2004)—as well as between different capitalists—political and economic power under American occupation consolidated in the missionary-descendant “Big Five” sugar corporations, who also controlled banking, utilities, shipping and imports (MacLennan 2014; Kent 1993).

Sugar became less lucrative as labor organized and cheaper frontiers were opened for production, and eventually the Big Five, newly arriving capitalists, and a rising plantation worker-descendant Asian elite, found greater profit opportunities in tourism-development (Kent 1993; Cooper and Daws 1985). However, the socio-ecological landscape laid by “King Sugar” supplies the conditions for today’s agrochemical+seed industry operations at the peripheries of a tourism-military economy, including: consolidated land control accompanied by (often illegal but sanctioned) control over water resources; regulatory regimes designed to facilitate the interests of large landowners and agribusiness; reliance on single export industries and institutions financially and ideologically entrenched in their perpetuation; communities created and subsequently abandoned by plantations; ethnicized occupational inequalities (Okamura 2008); a built environment designed for thirsty monocrops; and dogmas around the “necessity” of large agribusiness that mimic original colonial-capitalist preachings (Brower 2015, forthcoming; MacLennan 2014).

As sugar vacated and tourism’s vulnerabilities were made increasingly apparent in the 1980s and 1990s, rhetoric about “diversifying” the economy, especially through creation of a “high-tech sector,” spanned the political spectrum, notably intertwined with neoliberal policies aimed at attracting new business to the islands. The horizon of social possibility was largely reduced to techno-euphoric imaginations, especially of biotechnology (Altonn 1998). In the early days of

genetically engineered crops, some of the first outdoor field tests were conducted in Hawai'i, attractive for its year-round growing season, laws providing investment capital and tax incentives, and place "within" the U.S. (while isolated from major commercial agriculture) (Brower 2015, forthcoming; Voosen 2011). At the same time, corn seed companies that had come to Hawai'i starting in the 1960s were being bought up by large chemical corporations,⁴ reflecting rapid consolidations happening at the global level in the wake of biotechnology advances and court decisions extending full patent protection to life forms (Howard 2009). As sugar and pineapple production relocated out of the islands, space was made for the consolidating chemical+seed+biotech industry to expand onto larger tracts of land equipped with water infrastructure, near communities in need of jobs. With an ecological and political landscape disciplined to the mandates of large capitalist agribusiness, and under strong federal U.S. intellectual property law and Reagan's anti-regulatory "coordinated framework for regulation of biotechnology," Hawai'i was ideally suited for the 21st-century operations of the emerging global chemical+seed+biotech oligopoly (Jasanoff 2005).

The agrochemical+seed+biotechnology industry is today dominated by six firms (Monsanto, Dow, DuPont, Syngenta, BASF, and Bayer), which developed as a vertically and horizontally integrated oligopoly through the 1990s-early 2000s "merger mania" and intellectual property sweep-up (Hauter 2012, 236). These six global companies control 75 percent of private sector plant breeding research, 60 percent of the commercial seed market, 76 percent of agrochemical sales, and virtually all commercialized transgenic traits (ETC 2013). Through their intellectual property rights, market, and research dominance, they largely control the direction of agricultural biotechnology research, which from the start has been used as a mechanism to also sell more agrochemical products. The first major GM crop offered was Monsanto's "Roundup-Ready"—coupling seeds with their proprietary herbicide—a major breakthrough for the company as it faced a sunset patent on Roundup, failure to bring new chemical products to market, and lawsuits and regulations over consequences of past products (Glover 2010). Forty years into research, over 99 percent of global acres planted in GM crops are either engineered for herbicide tolerance or to produce their

⁴ Including Corn States (Monsanto), Illinois Foundation Seeds (Dow), Trojan Seed Co. (Pfizer to Monsanto), Funk's G (Ciba to Cargill to Monsanto), Northrup-King (Syngenta), and Pioneer Hi-Bred (DuPont).

own insecticide, with the dominant seller still being “Roundup-Ready” crops that primarily feed factory-farms and fuel cars (James 2014).

Today around half of all American farmland is planted in corn or soy with patented transgenic traits, and since 2003 global GM crop production has increased from 68 to 182 million hectares (James 2014). In step with this rapid commercialization, seed corn is now Hawai‘i’s largest agricultural commodity, with 8 million pounds exported in 2013-2014. Nearly every genetically engineered corn seed grown globally has touched Hawai‘i in its development (Pollack 2013). Hawai‘i also remains a center of GMO experimentation, with more field tests than anywhere else in the United States. In 2014, 164 different field tests were conducted at 1,141 sites (ISB 2015). Intense pesticide use is associated with both seed cultivation and GMO field trials, with herbicide-resistance being the most frequently tested transgenic trait. Sales records obtained through a Freedom of Information request indicate that on the island of Kaua‘i, 22 different restricted-use pesticides, comprising approximately 5,477 pounds and 5,885 gallons, were used during 2012. From a class-action lawsuit also on that island, it was divulged that when general-use pesticides (such as glyphosate) are accounted for, at least 90 pesticide formulations with 63 different active ingredients were used by one company (DuPont) between 2007-2012, and that pesticides were applied 250-300 days per year, at an average of 10-16 applications per day (Jervis and Smith 2013). Voluntary pesticide reporting indicates higher pesticide usage by other companies, with the organophosphate *chlorpyrifos*, a neurotoxin prone to drift, amongst the most frequently and heavily used.

Numerous local doctors have submitted official statements expressing concern that they may be witnessing effects of pesticide exposure in communities living near fields, potentially including higher-than-average rates of rare birth defects, miscarriages, unusual cancers, respiratory and hormonal problems, and recurring dermatitis and nose-bleeds (public testimony, Kaua‘i Bill 2491). In the town of Waimea on the island of Kaua‘i, on at least two occasions dozens of school children were taken to the hospital with symptoms of vomiting, nose-bleeds, headaches, and fainting after smelling noxious odors. While the State Department of Agriculture buffered companies in suggesting causes were inconclusive, there is little doubt amongst teachers and residents that these were acute poisonings resulting from pesticide drift by a neighboring Syngenta field, and that these major incidents were not the only occasions in which students and teachers were impacted (Skolnick 2013; Maluhia Group 2015). Inability to confirm evidence of the poisonings or to ensure regulatory

protection from the State illustrate what ecologist Sandra Steingraber (1997, 71) calls the “miasma of uncertainty,” and the often long and intentionally delayed “game” of “scientific proof” in which the terms are stacked against those who “feel the effects of environmental derangement first, longest, and most acutely” (Seager 2003, 962-963).

The communities most impacted by chemical company operations are primarily working-class, predominantly Native Hawaiian and multi-ethnic communities that have relied on plantation agriculture for employment over several generations. Nearly all field-workers are either from Hawai‘i’s most marginalized ethnic groups, including Filipina/o and Native Hawaiians (Okamura 2008), or migrants from Southeast Asia, Pacific Islands, or Latin America on “guest-worker” or other temporary visas. The Westside of Kaua‘i, a particularly affected region, is also host to the island’s landfill and the world’s largest missile testing range. On that island, thousands of acres leased to chemical companies are “State lands,” those seized from the Kingdom of Hawai‘i at the time of its overthrow, and currently mandated to be used partly for “the betterment of the conditions of native Hawaiians.” Agrochemical operations are conditioned upon, and inseparable from, ongoing colonialism and resource dispossession, including what many legal scholars say is also an illegal “occupation” of Hawai‘i by the United States.

The Eruption of Politics: Bill 2491 and Subsequent Swells of Resistance

A large and growing movement, intertwined with other agrifood and social movements, has been drawing attention to Hawai‘i as what activists dub “ground zero” for agrochemical+seed industry research and development operations. A smaller movement since 2002 focused on seed saving and public education around socio-ecological concerns related to GM crops, with a wave of resistance led by Native Hawaiians emerging in 2005 to the patenting and genetic engineering of their traditional staple food kalo (taro). Considered by Hawaiians to be both their sacred elder brother and the “staff of life,” long-time indigenous activist Walter Ritte likened the private ownership and genetic manipulation of kalo to the original enclosure of the commons, now robbing spiritual power: “Biotechnology is the second Māhele... the Mana Māhele” (Trask 2006, 24). More generally, agrifood projects in the islands encompass a range of reformist, progressive and radical “alternative” food practices and movements (Holt Gimenez and Shattuck 2011, 117), including struggles for

indigenous rights to land, water and subsistence practices (Gupta 2015). Connected to wider agrifood mobilizations, in the past two years there has been an eruption of politics around concerns over the health and environmental impacts of pesticide use by the chemical+seed industry.

Activist organizing on the island of Kauaʻi led in 2013 to a coalitional effort to pass County Bill 2491, mandating pesticide disclosure, a health and environmental study, and pesticide buffer-zones around residential areas and shorelines. Its passage set national precedent as the first U.S. local government law to regulate the chemical+seed companies at the site of seed cultivation and GMO field trials, and for the first time it drew major international attention to pesticide and environmental justice concerns at such sites (Pollack 2013). Rippling across the island chain, Hawaiʻi Island County then passed a law that would prevent the chemical+seed companies from ever establishing operations there. Most remarkable, in November 2014 a Maui County (including Molokai and Lānaʻi islands) ballot initiative placing a temporary moratorium on “all GE practices and operations” pending an environmental and health impact study was passed with 50 percent of the vote, despite Dow and Monsanto outspending advocates 87:1 with a state record of \$7.9 million. All three counties are being sued by the chemical companies to block implementation of the laws, while at the same time battles are being fought at the Hawaiʻi State legislature. The issue largely defined the 2014 elections, and has galvanized and politicized young people especially. It has been importantly intertwined with a wave of progressive organizing and coalition-building across the archipelago, also with important meaning to food sovereignty, Hawaiian self-determination, anti-corporate, democratic, and other environmental and social justice struggles.

Keeping the Crazyies in Their Place: Narratives of Depoliticization

The swell of collective political engagement in Hawaiʻi has become a major concern to the industry, as Hawaiʻi is both integral to its global chains of production, and is drawing international attention to injustices along those chains. While an extensive review of industry tactics to subvert resistance is beyond the scope of this paper, I will outline several entwined discursive narratives as they were deployed against Kauaʻi County’s pesticide disclosure Bill 2491 (which reached a higher fervor on Maui and Molokai in 2014). As will be readily apparent to many, these local narratives are embedded in a global production of ideas around agricultural biotechnology (funded especially by those seeking

to profit from it), and/or similar to general patterns in environmental health controversy. To identify such narratives is not to entirely reject the aspects of critique in them that are relevant and useful, some which are discussed further below. Of particular challenge in this regard is the way in which important critique is appropriated by those seeking to marginalize dissent, and thus has the effect of silencing debates within the movement or forcing rigid dismissal of “industry talking points” that may include constructive elements. Thus, rather than a repudiation, the primary interest here lies in how the following narratives are constructed in ways that foreclose the possibility of *la politique* (Rancière 2001) and ultimately serve to hold in place injustice and the power of capital.

As I aim to show in a brief discussion following each identified narrative, it is useful to view these not as isolated industry strategies, but in the context of ideological contours of capital today. They are not distinct from wider patterns of ideas that restrict regulation of capital or more radical structural change. Further, these narratives do not simply belong to industry—they are entangled with critique that claims skepticism of the industry and allegiance to social justice, but locates only imperfection and contradiction in collective struggle for social change. As such, they are fruitful spaces of investigation for the insight they provide into the depth of depoliticizing and individualizing neoliberal logic today. It must at the same time be specified that the wide dissemination of these particular narratives has been accomplished, overtly and covertly, by way of large industry investment and coordination, including through: more traditional PR campaigns and “community outreach” by hired local political elite; recent prolific tactics of online trolling, blogs and astroturf⁵ groups; and influence in institutions ranging from the predictable (Farm Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, etc.) to school, hospital, and neighborhood group boards.

I. There Is No Alternative

Both at the local and global level, the industry presents itself as that which we cannot live without. Globally it proclaims to feed the world and make modern society possible. Locally in Hawai‘i it professes to provide irreplaceable jobs, taxes, economic “ripple effects,” investment in

⁵ Astroturf is the widespread practice of creating groups or coalitions that appear as broad and grassroots-based, but are primarily conceived and funded by industry or public relations firms.

infrastructure, and support to small local farmers whose supply chains would “collapse” if not for their presence.⁶ Any change affecting the industry is suggested to have uncontrollable negative consequences: “Bill 2491 will destroy local agriculture,” “it will hurt farmers in poor countries” (SaveKauaiFarms.org), and it could “cripple” the economy. The story of looming catastrophe took vivid form in testimony against Bill 2491, speculating that the pesticide-disclosure law could lead to hospitals and schools being forced to shut down, agricultural lands being replaced by luxury hotels, a bankrupting of the County, and loss of individual freedom in the slippery slope of government intrusion into the lives of farmers. In addition to potential disaster, the impossibilities of regulation are pronounced as cemented in law and government’s irreparable incapacities: “The same County [will enforce 2491] that can’t seem to keep the bus stops with garbage cans, sidewalks clear of bushes or a handful of public bathrooms clean” (comments in *The Garden Island Newspaper*); “No legitimate objective will be realized” (chemical company attorneys); “[Bill 2491 has done] absolutely nothing. It has got us in court and a huge attorney bill” (Council member). A range of regulatory initiatives are categorically lumped together as hopeless: “bad bill,” “flawed measure,” “administrative nightmare.”

What this congeals into is the sense of “you can’t change anything, we are your only possibility.” At the risk of glossing over important local nuances and rationalities behind this narrative, I want to draw out its universal context. While capital proclaims expansive possibility in techno-utopian futures, horizons of possibility in regards to the social order appear constricted and immutable. In general, the logics and processes of capital (and its presupposed support from the state) do not gain legitimacy by being presented as “The Answer”—a fiction that would be too hard to sustain amongst abundant evidence to the contrary—but by continually reproducing at local and global scales the mantra of the past decades, “There Is No Alternative” (Duncombe 1997, 5). There is a sense that whether one likes it or not, the world is governed by both the universal mandates of capital and the expressed interests of the most powerful capitalists, and that there is “no point fighting the inevitable” (Fisher and Gilbert 2013, 90). While typically theorized in regards to capitalism and neoliberalism generally, TINA is also made manifest through localized constructions of lock-in to particular capitalist-state arrangements. Moreover, as Alain Badiou (2012) explicates, we

⁶ Quotations not specified can be assumed as frequent remarks in media or other visible spaces of public discourse (for example, public hearings).

are instructed to lower our expectations in order to protect ourselves from “fatal utopia,” the unforeseen consequences of attempting to construct something alternative to whatever capital has on offer. As observed in pitched claims that a pesticide disclosure law would spell economic ruin, this logic of catastrophism drills all the way down to mediocre regulation of capital.

II. Rationality Has Been Lost to Hysteria

While chemical+seed corporations and their local operations are continually (re)formulated as simply necessary (or at minimum, inevitable), concerns about their environmental and health consequences are disparaged as having no basis in fact or science, driven by emotion, fear, “ideology,” or “personal motives” (Kester 2014). A broad and heterogenous range of concerns are lumped into a singular and monolithic “scourge of paranoia,” comprised of subjects that warrant the unsavory characterizations of: hysterical, fanatical, anti-farmer, anti-agriculture, Luddite, paranoid, delusional, and conspiracy theorist. Cautiously anecdotal evidence is nothing more than a “scare tactic,” while citizens are incapable of literacy beyond “selected beliefs as claimed in Google searches” (blog comments). By casting certain affairs into the realm of the “complicated,” lay voices are made ignorant and only those with specialized “expertise” are said to possess valid knowledge. In “refutation by distraction” (Oreskes and Conway 2010, 126), the practices of residential pesticide users, golf courses, County water dechlorination, and organic farmers are pulled into center stage, while irrelevant information spawns confusion and doubt.

The chemical+seed industry at the same time appeals to notions of homogenous and certain science (there is only “science” or “anti-science”), while also manipulating the fact of always existing scientific uncertainty in order to delay, distort, confuse, and manufacture doubt. Ideas about what science is and does are used in seemingly paradoxical ways, to both foreclose what are actually political conflicts between different social interests, and to create the appearance of wide spectrums of scientific debate where there is actually a notable amount of agreement (on the dangers of certain pesticides, for example)—obfuscations that are two sides to the same coin (Oreskes and Conway 2010). Worth elaborating here are how assumptions of scientific neutrality, singularity, and the superiority of particular specialist knowledges privilege certain interests and voices and silence others. As scholars of science have pointed out, notions of “pure” science—an ideal of

“autonomous, value-free, and disinterested science”—remain somewhat of an “American Eden” (Jasanoff 2005, 228). Far from an argument for relativism, scientific knowledge and the uses to which it is put “never comes free of social interests or implications” (Wynne 1992, 281), and is itself a space of struggle between deep-seated social assumptions, material interests, and class positions. Communities impacted by polluting industries are seldom considered generators of scientific knowledge, though lay people may undertake “rigorous accumulation of knowledge of the physical world” through both their experiences and access to “official” scientific knowledge (Narayan and Scandrett 2014, 564). While scholars have shown that, in environmental health matters especially, lay citizens may be better than experts at making room for the unknown and contribute specialisms of their own (Wynne 1992), Meritonian visions of disinterested science are exploited to exclude certain knowledge and make invisible the value judgements and conflicts inherent in what is presented as purely “scientific.”

III. Politics are Disrupting Aloha

Ignorant public “hysteria” is said to be the fault of those engaging in “deliberate fear-mongering” and “manipulation... to advance a political agenda” (blogs), and especially driven by “outsiders” with a “cynical agenda” (Kester 2014). A “radical minority taking over” is blamed for “dividing the community” and destroying the islands’ “spirit of aloha” (“Take Back Kauai”; NoGMOMeansNoAloha.com). Political conflict is equated to a “loss” of the character “that expresses the charms, warmth and sincerity of Hawai’i’s people” (*The Garden Island Newspaper*). Erosion of virtue, violence, and juvenility are associated with the “No GMO = No Aloha movement,” including frequent reference to “mobs” and behaviors described as “threatening,” “temper tantrums,” “vandals,” “spoiled brats,” “yelling and screaming,” “obnoxious,” and “immature” (Eagle 2014; HawaiiFarmersDaughter.com). Divisiveness comes to be the problem in and of itself, to such an extent that it becomes difficult to recall the conservatism of demand for pesticide disclosure and buffer zones from chemical companies infamous for their toxic impacts and cover-ups.

Discourse around “aloha” has a long historical relationship to the discouraging of dissent, most especially of Hawaiian nationalist movements (Ohnuma 2008). Also relevant beyond local

context, this narrative reflects a wider skepticism towards politics and an especially anti-statist impulse that has intensified with neoliberalism. Citizens distance themselves from the contaminated field of political conflict in a culture of atomized cynicism, disavowing both the inherent corruptness of government and the possibility of collective struggle for social change. Along with government and politicians, activists are often regarded with suspicion and disapproval. Allegations of hidden motives and hypocrisy are frequently used to discredit them, with the assumption that if one cannot fully escape global chains of capitalist exploitation, then one is not entitled to speak about changing them. The only rational action, then, is made to be addressing one's personal lifestyle choices, and to attempt wider socio-political change is chided as an inescapably self-righteous and duplicitous act. Notably, there is an acceptance of abstract and "far-away" criticism, for example, of "the industrial food system," but when a major node of that system is generated locally and involves local collaborators, calling attention to it is denounced as being conflictual. As dissent and conflict are "evacuated from the political arena," they are relegated to the terrain of "unauthorized violence" (Swyngedouw 2010, 227).

As indicated, in Hawai'i such unauthorized disruption is presented as particularly driven by "non-locals." Though resistance to agrochemical operations is broadly composed of Native Hawaiian, multi-ethnic and haole (white) participants, the over-representation and hypervisibility of whiteness in the movement (complicated by white activists' own practices), enables a construction of a "local versus haole" issue, with the irony of white bosses in Missouri or Basel readily obscured by brown bodies in local fields. The identity "local" emerged historically in Hawai'i out of a shared experience of multi-ethnic oppression on plantations and in opposition to the haole elite, and later became an important stance of resistance to development especially. Though originating in class struggle and opposition to white racism and foreign capital (Isaki 2008), the "local" tends to conceal ways in which both haole and "local" elite secure their interests with, through and alongside "external forces" of global capital and American empire (Ohnuma 2002). While the "local" is an "ongoing project" perhaps still containing liberatory potentials (Isaki 2011, 86), in dominant discourse around agrochemical operations it has "become a cipher for new conservative impulses" (Isaki 2008, 139), serving to mask power and structural injustice, subvert resistance, and fuel divisions between potential allies.

IV. Let's All Just Work Together, Led By Experts

As activists are repudiated as perpetrators of divisiveness and makers of myth, the industry claims desire for collaboration and the expert knowledge to bring life back into unified harmony. In constructing their oneness with a wider undifferentiated public, industry describes itself as “neighbors,” “part of the local community,” just “people” who have “worked the land for many generations” (SaveKauaiFarms.org). A perception of equality and openness is manufactured with invitations to “come see our farms,” and “get educated about what we do.” Against the antagonism of the hysterical minority mob are the majority—the interests of workers, farmers, the industry, and locals, made synonymous and united in a narrative of victimhood in the “war without evidence” by activists engaged in “group think totalitarianism” (blogs). The restoration of harmony, aloha, local ways and values will be realized by defeating politics and rabble-rousers: “We fight for our friends, we fight for our jobs, we fight for our families, *we fight for our way of life*” (youtube video, emphasis added).

Suggesting amicability and leadership in ending controversy, the industry calls for “common middle ground” (Bill 2491 testimony): “through cooperation among government, community and the growers” (Kester 2014), “nonpolitical” and “science-based perspectives” can be found. Such solutions are said to lie in voluntary action (designed by industry and expert bureaucrats, and self-monitored by industry), better education of the public (by industry experts), “neutral fact-finding” involving “stakeholders” and “community mediators”⁷ that can discover and manage the truth of the situation, and individual risk management through changes in personal lifestyle.

Theoretical conversations around such concepts as the post-political are useful for interrogating the foreclosure of a “genuine space of political disagreement” (Swyngedouw 2010, 228) that takes place in the denunciation of activist “mobs” and subsequent appeals to collaboration. I do not wish here to enter debates about the “analytical accuracy and political utility” (McCarthy 2013, 19) of using such concepts to generalize the present condition of things, but rather to suggest the insight they give into (heavily contested) mechanisms of depoliticization. In describing the post-

⁷ See County of Kaua'i Resolution 2013-72. While further study is clearly and urgently important, my critique is of the obfuscation of politics.

political, Žižek (2008, 34) argues that “the depoliticised, socially objective, expert administration and coordination of interests” has become “the zero-level of politics.” The dominance of a “managerial logic” (Swyngedouw 2010, 225) reduces the political to the technical, to questions of expert knowledge and mere management of the facts. “Politics becomes something one can do without making decisions that divide and separate” (Diken and Lausten 2004, 99). While some discussion and dispute are encouraged, it is only in so far as it stays within the general frame (Swyngedouw 2010), in which problems are ultimately resolved through “compromise, managerial and technical arrangement, and the production of consensus” (Swyngedouw 2011, 77). In the thought of Rancière (2001), “the essence of consensus is not peaceful discussion and reasonable agreement as opposed to conflict or violence. Its essence is the annulment of dissensus...” It is the containment of all disagreement to fit within the existing social order, within “the partition of the sensible” (Rancière 2001).

Central to this operation is the flattening of disparate interests and the uniting of the individual and capital—the non-difference between the worker, the impacted resident, the local elite, and the chemical corporation. “Whereas the proper democratic political recognizes the constitutive split of the people, the inherent antagonisms and heterogeneities that cut through the social... the post-political disavows these antagonisms” (Swyngedouw 2010, 225). The “undifferentiated moral and technocratic” global environmentalism (Taylor 1997, 163) that is the chemical+seed industry’s pretext—“We face daunting challenges in feeding the world today... DuPont and its collaborators has already made great strides in meeting the challenge... Because, quite simply, feeding the world is everyone’s business”—is matched locally by their communitarian voluntarism: “We value the island, raise our families here and want to preserve the land and lifestyle for future generations. We’re in this together. Kaua’i is our home” (SaveKauaiFarms.org).

There is a critical interplay between “the impossible,” and capital’s utopian promises of harmony and expert management in “our” best interests, as everything progresses towards better ends without anything real having to change in the social order. The intertwining operation of these narratives was marked in the position of the Mayor of Kaua’i, who vetoed Bill 2491 on the grounds that the chemical+seed industry is economically necessary to and “part of our island,” and political controversy is avoidable by “bring[ing] people together” to “discover the facts” and implement voluntary solutions. The possibility of disagreement with and rearrangement of the existing order of

the situation is negated in the “disavowal of the political and the staging of politics as a form of consensual management” (Swyngedouw 2010, 227).

Contradiction, Complexity, and Horizons of Possibility

Activists struggle on a terrain that is shaped by deep suspicion of politics and social change, and frequently appeal to neoliberal common sense in contradictory ways, while at the same time working around and between narratives that foreclose the possibility of politics. In bringing pesticides, producing communities, and collective political engagement to the forefront, Hawai'i's “GMO ground zero” resistance works to shift a conversation that, in recent years, has been somewhat dominated in the United States by individualized consumer concerns, market-based action, labeling campaigns, and what has been critiqued as the reproduction of neoliberal logic in agrifood activism (Guthman 2008a). At the same time, events in Hawai'i are also co-constitutive of wider “anti-GMO” activism, including some of the more problematic moments that emerge from these entangled networks. As in U.S. discourse surrounding GMOs, there are notable tendencies of: racialized and classed moralizing about “what to eat” (Guthman 2008b); faith in market-based mechanisms to deliver social change; singular “bad-actor” (evil Monsanto) focus; and a peripheral propensity for inaccurate and regressive rantings of the *Natural News* sort. Further, while concerns related to GMOs are broad, they are often framed as problems of the “thing” (or more correctly, a technological process) itself (“anti-GMO”), rather than problems of the social conditions and relations that make a technology function as it does. This is not to dismiss that many are concerned by potential consequences of cutting and splicing DNA, but to suggest that discourse and possibilities for systemic change remain limited when the social is not clearly centered as the subject of critique. Capitalist enclosure, commodification, exploitation and power come to look like problems of a technology, rather than the basis from which particular uses of technology materialize.

Attending more specifically to contradiction and complexity in Hawai'i's heterogeneous “GMO ground zero” movement, I will make a few tentative comments on interconnected challenges related to race and class composition of the movement, workers and economic justice, de-colonial struggle and wider systems change. What follows is far from a comprehensive exploration of layers of limitation and potential. It is important to specify that many co-activists are

co-theorists in these critiques, and actively work to challenge such dynamics within and around the movement.

While resistance to agrochemical operations takes a multiplicity of forms, including “everyday tactics” (Scott 2008) and more subtle defiance, in the most visible spaces of the movement (in media, at public events, leading organizations, using paraphernalia, etc.), whites and white culture(s) tend to be over-represented. Matters of participation and representation are complicated by unreflexive white and settler practices, and especially non-examination of issues of class, race, and privilege. Localized concerns about pesticide impacts are problematically bound-up with dominantly white middle-class “right living” discourse about consuming GM foods (DuPois and Goodman 2005, 362). Additionally, activists (often white) from communities not directly impacted by agrochemical operations can be unreflexive in practices of speaking for, speaking over, or victimizing those living near fields. Rejections of “haoles telling us what to do”⁸ are wrapped up in Hawai‘i’s violent history of ethnicized plantation hierarchies and continuing structural inequalities. The entanglements of many movement participants in systemic processes of rural gentrification and displacement of working-class people from the islands complicates solidarity around a land-use and economic issue, especially when related injustices are not also confronted straight-on.

Related to these dynamics, activists have been challenged to build solidarity with workers and to center their concerns. While there are certainly immense obstacles to this task in a polarized setting where jobs are at stake (and divisiveness intentionally nurtured by bosses), the inseparability of economic and environmental justice is a lacking discourse and focus. Similarly, inadequate attention has been paid to the matter of justice for farmers who grow GM crops (primarily papaya); many who are small Filipino producers who find themselves navigating a variety of institutional, market, social, and technological pressures. Without focusing concerns for livelihoods and a wider critique of structural economic dependencies and inequalities, including their racialized contours, parts of the movement risk elitism and fracture. There is also more to be asked about limitations and potentials for universalizing frames of justice, especially in a primarily local political struggle that, while challenging a node of global capitalist power, is not necessarily rooted in overarching global solidarity and visions of structural change. Activists face real, strategic difficulties making demands

⁸ Direct quote of resident living near fields.

for change within the particularities of local struggle while simultaneously affirming globalized refusal. Yet without this wider resistance, distortion and recuperation become probable. In these challenges, the operation of the ideological hegemony of localism is pronounced.

Some of the stickiest contradictions in “GMO ground zero” activism surface around dynamics of continuing colonialism, while at the same time decolonization possibilities are perhaps expanded by recent struggle. Nodes of decolonial and agrochemical struggle are entwined, often in ways that are not straightforward and with complicated relationship to differently positioned Native Hawaiians and their own heterogeneous interests. Just some of these nodes include water rights conflicts between Hawaiian taro farmers and chemical companies, the leasing of “State” (seized) lands to agrochemical operations, biopiracy and intellectual property patents, place-based indigenous food practices (Gupta 2015), and demands for political and resource self-determination (Goodyear-Ka’ōpua, Hussey and Wright 2014). Again, insufficient grappling within parts of the “GMO ground zero movement” with matters of class and race, colonial settler practices and investments, and ongoing dispossessions and marginalizations of indigenous Hawaiians, undermines solidarity and liberatory potential (Trask 1991). That said, recent widening struggles have done much to articulate the inseparability of agrochemical occupations from colonial context and to unite diverse participation around protection of land, environment, sacred places, and various conceptualizations of sovereignty.

In general, within “GMO ground zero” activism there is much work to be done building the solidarities and analysis that orient engagement in more radical system change. The problem of TINA becomes actual when there is a void of radical alternatives, and, as with other sites of environmental justice conflict, there is a real danger of capitalism’s anarchic war on the planet and humanity being battled out between defense of livelihoods and defense of life-earth. The bankruptcy of the collective radical imagination severs potentialities beyond the lesser-of-evils—hotels, agrochemical plantations, or the military, are truly all that are on offer. The warnings that regulating capital will only result in economic deprivation or cemented over agricultural lands, are made correct when certain social arrangements are assumed natural or unchangeable. Activists most typically propose “local food” as the straightforward and uni-dimensional alternative to agrochemical operations. While clearly favorable, there is a shortage of thorough consideration for political-economic constraints to meaningfully-scaled localized food production or, ultimately, to how

focusing on localization as a value in and of itself will deliver more liberatory potentials if still embedded in colonial-capitalist structures and compulsions. And yet, there is at the same time symbiotic relationship with widening social possibilities. Creative localization projects are layered with post-capitalist ambition, a language of the commons, practices aiming to democratize ownership of wealth (Alperovitz 2011), immediate food justice implications; and in Hawai'i they often directly challenge structural plantation-economy inheritances and colonial dispossessions. Indeed, historically for Native Hawaiians, political activism has been inseparable from cultural and resource practices including growing food (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, Hussey and Wright 2014).

Most broadly and beyond Hawai'i, increasing public engagement with food issues offers critical openings for radicalization of thought and action as collective values and desires collide with capital and are politicized. While tangled with problematic themes and surely not a monolithic field (Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011), I would suggest that current attention to agrifood issues is also a space ripe with conditions for “revolutions at the level of common sense” (Graeber 2012). Ambitions that run contrary to capitalist logic and presentation of immanent alternative capabilities can be made to weaken capital's ideological pillars (Shannon et al. 2012). At a moment when TINA is on shaky ground, the battle over rapidly changeable common sense is a most strategic field of struggle (Graeber 2012), and repudiation of the “corporate food system's insatiable appetite for profit” can be made to move in directions that expand the egalitarian imagination, especially in the connection between more radical trends in the Global South and progressive trends in the Global North. Pushing the boundaries of collective thought towards wider horizons of possibility requires engaging, and indeed nurturing, seeds of justice, equality, democracy and human solidarity in the rocky soils from which they are attempting to grow. In Hawai'i, as elsewhere, much of what is budding is cultivated by what indigenous Hawaiian scholar Manulani Meyer (2013, 6) notes as simply “native common sense” of dynamic interdependence, of “unseen connecting patterns,” of the recognition that we are all “the causal linkages that alter its capacity.” No wisdom, science, and expression of mutual-responsibility could be more essential.

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