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Through My Great-Grandfather's Eyes: The Environmental History  
of Hilo

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Envi/ Hist 234 American Environmental History

Professor Chris Wells

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*His deep, sunken eyes gazed at the rainy Hilo sky. He sat on the grass, looking over the deserted plantation. Smoke stacks pierced the grey sky, and a single, dirty white mansion stood in relief to the ominous landscape. “This was where I was born,” said the man. His skin was speckled with sun-spots, displaying the long hours spent in the sun with the calloused hands that were decorated with wrinkles and callouses from his plantation days. “The a’ina<sup>1</sup> has changed,” he said, as his eyes scanned the surrounding green landscape surrounding him, still scarred from years of misuse. “Mi-chan,<sup>2</sup>” he called, commanding my attention with his slight Japanese accent, “The land was not always like this, we were not always like this. There wasn’t any businesses, no cars, no tourists. Just aloha,<sup>3</sup> and the land. From the time the Polynesians found the Hawaiian Islands to now, the people’s relationship with the environment has changed. The transformation of the economy, from subsistence farming to ranching, to the plantation days, and now the tourists’ dollars, has caused a change in our relationship with the environment. We have changed the a’ina, and it has changed us.”*

*“Back before I was born on the sugar plantation, before my Otosan<sup>4</sup> moved to Hawaii, the ali’i<sup>5</sup> owned the land. They came from another island in the Pacific in their canoes, paddling for miles. They used the stars and the moon to guide them in the right direction, and the birds gave them promise of approaching land and the wind and the ocean current help them find their way onto the beautiful island (Schmitt, “Other Navigational Signs”).” His hand waved up towards the sky, as if beckoning it to guide us too. “They landed here, right on our own precious Big Island (Wilmshurst et al. 2011). Their wooden canoes carried plants and animals from the Polynesian Islands to grant them a new life in Hawai’i. Kalo was one of them and, Mi-chan, kalo to Hawaiians is like rice to us. (Schmitt, “Taro”).” His eyes folded over as he grinned at me, assuming that I had the same love for rice as he*

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<sup>1</sup> land

<sup>2</sup> My nickname, “Chan” means little girl in Japanese

<sup>3</sup> love

<sup>4</sup> father

<sup>5</sup> Hawaiian Chief

*did.* “Kalo was the Hawaiian’s spirit and culture. They made that poi<sup>6</sup> from it and ate it at every meal. Lucky thing you do not like poi too much, Mi-chan.” *His airy laugh filled the room, mocking the haole<sup>7</sup> in my blood.* “They were so akamai.<sup>8</sup> It was a part of them, their culture and spirit, who they were as Hawaiians. Kalo was used for medicine and dye. What they did not use they replanted and it went back into the a’ina to help more kalo grow (Schmitt, “Taro”). It became central to their lifestyle. Ali’i fought over the land for kalo as it was a sign of power: economic, political and spiritual power. Only men could farm and prepare the kalo due to the power that the Hawaiians believed it held (Schmitt, “Taro”).”

*He took a pause and began walking down the hill that led to the plantation, taking careful, slow steps one at a time. His joints creaked and shivered, but were clearly strong. I strolled after him and our feet fell together, step by step, sinking into the dry ground.* “Must have been good fertilizer too, because kalo was not easy to grow. It was tedious, and required a lot of nutritious soil and water. For centuries, the Hawaiians saved the a’ina by being organized and showing malama<sup>9</sup>. It was nothing like the plantations- no tools to help them plant and harvest. They used their hands and their minds and were able to continue the living off the land. They set the fields on fire to keep the soil rich and used the make<sup>10</sup> trees to build their hales<sup>11</sup> and canoes. Sometimes they would cover the soil with old ferns or plant banana and sugarcane in the kalo fields to ensure the a’ina stayed strong. The a’ina looked nothing like it does today (Schmitt, “Taro”). Imagine having bananas, and sugarcane with the kalo, it would look nothing like the farms do now, with the uniform fields that stretch all around Hilo” (Dunford et al 70).” *His steps slowed, as we were approaching a small ditch that ran down the hill and continued down, giving the shape of a seemingly endless gecko’s tail.* “Nothing was wasted -- the a’ina

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<sup>6</sup> Hawaiian food made from grinding up kalo root

<sup>7</sup> directly translated as “men with no breath,” commonly used to describe tourist or Caucasians

<sup>8</sup> smart

<sup>9</sup> respect

<sup>10</sup> dead

<sup>11</sup> house

was precious to them and it showed in how they treated it, unlike today.” *He sighed, and paused in front of the empty channel.* “But I will get to that later. It was not like kalo was perfect either. It required choke<sup>12</sup> water and these trenches allowed the water to run all through Hilo. The ali’i had their men build them and the ali’i controlled the water and controlled it jealously, as it showed their prosperity and wealth. They did not have money or anything, until the haole came. The ali’i distributed the water to individuals, and they could not be crossed. If someone overused the water,” *he made a slashing motion across his neck,* “they were make.<sup>13</sup> Even with this system though, the valuable soil lost tons of nutrients (Kobayashi et al). Nowhere near as bad as the damage that the sugar caused though.” *He shook his head slowly, and continued marching onward, diverging from the waterway.* “It is the haoles that taught us to use and own the a’ina rather than respect it.”

“It was 1778 when Mr. Captain Cook came along with his high and mighty crew. The Hawaiians had never seen anyone of light skin so they worshiped the haoles. They thought Cook was a god (Williams 240). That cost them. Cook and his crew kept coming back and even after the Hawaiians killed Cook, the haoles kept coming and stayed sometimes, with their cattle and sheep and goats and ugly plants. The cattle became so prevalent around the island that they actually started ranches, and those paniolos<sup>14</sup> were pretty successful too.”

“King Kamehameha<sup>15</sup> made it kapu<sup>16</sup> to kill any of the livestock and sold some land to the haoles, so the paniolos could continue to take control of the economy. The Hawaiians were in a losing battle from that point. The ranches just populated like the fire ants, and spread all over North Hilo as well as the whole island by 1800s, right before the sugar fever started (Fisher 356).” *His hands were animated, motioning to the outdoors and pointing to the far off land where the ranches were two*

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<sup>12</sup> a lot

<sup>13</sup> dead

<sup>14</sup> cowboys, person who herds cattle

<sup>15</sup> King Kamehameha was the first person to unite all of the islands under one ruler and was the first king of the Hawaiian monarchy.

<sup>16</sup> illegal

*centuries ago.* “The forests, the beautiful native forests that barely exist now, were so abundant before the cattle. And then, the cowboys cleared those forests and planted the rough grass that the Hawaiians have never seen before. That spread too, taking over entire landscapes and pushing out those native species, and the cattle did not help, trampling on the trees and carrying weed seedlings across the island. Erosion occurred too and soon the water would flood the streets, filled with cow dung and polluting from mauka to makai.<sup>17</sup> The fences did not even help with that and only caused problems for the Hawaiians (Fisher 351-361).”

*He paused for a moment and picked up a handful of soil. He sprinkled it into my hand and let it fall between my fingers.* “The Hawaiians did this. They did not own the land, the water, the volcano, not like we do now. All the Hawaiians lived on land that was controlled by the ali’i, who just served as the distributor of resources in the name of the gods. The chiefs separated the land so that the fishermen were in one area, houses in another, and certain areas only for agriculture. But everyone was o’hana and worked together. Nothing like the kapakai<sup>18</sup> system we have now, where most people do not even know their neighbors. That should be kapu!” *His cheeks appeared to be getting redder. I questioned if this was from the heat or the thought of people not having aloha.<sup>19</sup> He continued pointing in the direction of the houses.* “Those fences broke their culture, separating the o’hana community and by then, the ali’i did not exist. The monarchy was barely in control of the Hawaiians, as they were joining the paniolo to become ‘civilized.’” *He spit out the word, like it had a bad taste in his mouth, and the huts were creeping closer as we walked on.* “The concept of private land was brought on by the haoles and the fences made it visible. And the Hawaiians just watched and even helped the haoles while their land slipped away from them and into the hands of individuals (Fisher 351-361). No more malama<sup>20</sup> for the environment.” *He sighed, and approached the first wooden house, and placed his wrinkled*

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<sup>17</sup> from mountain to ocean

<sup>18</sup> messy, disorganized

<sup>19</sup> love

<sup>20</sup> protection

*hand on the rotting wood.* “The paniolo time was long but the sugar was more powerful and corrupt. I was born on a Japanese sugar plantation on the north side of Hilo. I remember Otosan and my uncles talking about how the paniolo took away business but that was not true. The paniolo never stood a chance when the Big 5 took over: Castle and Cooke, G. Brewer, American Factors, Theo H. Davies, and Alexander and Baldwin (Danninger). All were owned by haole missionary families and controlled all of Hilo.” *He beckoned towards the direction of the ocean and looked out into the distance, drawing memories from almost a century ago.* “Hilo was the main trading location on the Big Island and people from all over --immigrants, haoles, locals -- would always fill the streets.”

*He continued walking on, past the rows of decaying houses in the direction of the smoke stacks.* “The large sugar bosses had complete control. They had the monarchy in the palm of their hand, only because they could pay enormous taxes and appease the kings. The landscape suffered from the expansion, the a'ina grew tired but the monarchy did not care. Gone was kalo. Paniolo were losing control. The monarchy did not realize it, but sugar was king.”

“They had no sense of malama anymore. They thought they were above us plantation workers even though we had the same blood and dirt stained on our hands. No sense of ohana anymore. The rich kamaaina<sup>21</sup> tried to mimic the bosses and enter their world. They lost their aloha for the land, and started businesses that exploited the land. But they couldn't match the Big 5. It was astonishing. Us immigrants were at the bottom of the chain, kamaaina was just above us, and the haoles on top. The separation by class was evident, especially on the plantation. We lived in those pukas<sup>22</sup>” *he stopped walking and waved at the houses that were behind him,* “and the bosses lived in that,” *pointing at the distant white mansion.* “We all had our place. I was not allowed to step foot into that house. It was obnoxious, as we lived the shambles, working ourselves and the land into the ground. We were not even allowed to own land at that time. Only the rich kama'aina and the haoles. How ironic too, since it

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<sup>21</sup> local residents,

<sup>22</sup> holes

was not in the Hawaiian culture to own land before this. Everyone wanted a piece of the a'ina, to own and exploit. They couldn't see that Pele<sup>23</sup> was tired (Danninger).

“The living conditions were unbearable. Everyday, the sun would beat down on our backs and we would work for hours, the straw hats on our heads not providing us with much shade and we were never pau.<sup>24</sup>” *He looked up at his own hat, a baseball cap that fit snug on his head. I remembered seeing his straw hat hanging in his house, a personal token of the hard work that pushed him to his future.* “Tens of thousands of acres of land were all filled with sugar, but they were all owned by the same haole. And he never cared about the a'ina. When the steam mill came from the Mainland, it was like Christmas for the haoles. The plantations just grew and grew, using choke water. After a while, the water would turn brown from all the junk<sup>25</sup> from the fields. It disgusted me. During my childhood, I had to watch the a'ina disintegrate, from erosion and soil exhaustion. The forests were getting smaller, with pukas were native plants used to be. New plants had taken over our garden in the Japanese camps, and rats that came on the boats from the Mainland invaded up our food, leaving everything crumbled as if the menehune<sup>26</sup> were eating it (Tobin et al 120). We could never catch them either and they made us all sick, giving us the fever, making it even harder to work in the fields. The bosses would always get mad and tried to get rid of the rats. They brought over the mongoose, hoping that they would eat the rats. Pretty stupid too.” *He shook his head again.* “You would think for as smart as they were for taking over the Hawaiian monarchy that they would have realized that rats were nocturnal, and mongoose were not. Now they both give us diseases and eat the baby bird eggs (Robinson). They thought they could manipulate our a'ina. They were wrong. Only Pele can do that.”

*His head moved so that it was facing the volcano, seeming lost in thought, refreshing the memory of his childhood.* “ We were always scared they would hire other foreigners. We were the

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<sup>23</sup> Hawaiian goddess of the Volcano, one of the most powerful and popular Hawaiian deities

<sup>24</sup> done, finished

<sup>25</sup> waste

<sup>26</sup> little Hawaiian men that play tricks and make mischief.



haoles's servants, and the land suffered from it. They had us working until we were sick and people died. The Hawaiians got the worst of it. They died like mosquitoes because of all the diseases the haoles brought. Their numbers were slimming down.<sup>27</sup> (Puette 3-4). Then, the bosses brought the Chinese, and then us when the Chinese too tried to run away from the plantation.” (Robinson). That’s why I made it my goal to get off the plantation and make a life of my own, like Otosan wanted me to.” *He smiled, his cheeks reddening on his sun-spotted skin from pride. We stopped at the entrance of the factory and he sat down, patting the ground next to him. The sweat glistened on his hairline and he wiped it away before he continued.*

“Otosan used to tell me stories about how hot the plantation was when he first arrived. He said he was just one of many, a small portion in the large pool of workers. That is why he worked so hard and had us working at such an early age. We could have been replaced at anytime. The fear was always hanging over our heads. We heard stories about other camps, where the Chinese workers went on strike and refused to work so they all got fired and the bosses brought in kane<sup>28</sup> from the Philippines. It wasn’t until I was older that we got smart and decided to work together to scrap<sup>29</sup> against the bosses. But while we were still working in the fields,” *he pointed to the vast deserted land that had been infected with spots of green and brown of vegetation trying to survive on the poisoned land,* “we had to get the highest amount of sugarcane per acre and the plantation grew every year until we joined the U.S. We just continued seeping into the surrounding forests, spending a couple days chopping down the native trees and watching the soil of the overused become dry, deteriorating from lack of nutrients. But the environment did not matter. The bosses were only concerned about making money and continuing to dominate the Hawaiian economy. They kept bringing in more immigrants, cramming us into the land, using up more resources in an already struggling landscape. I wouldn’t have been

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<sup>27</sup> death

<sup>28</sup> men

<sup>29</sup> fight

surprised if the Pele just released her fury on us for what we were doing to her island. But we were just pawns under the haoles. Hilo became their personal kingdom and they controlled all of us: the Japanese, Hawaiians, and all the other immigrant groups. (Monaghan).”

“I remember one day, they delivered these barrels labeled toxic, skull faces painted on the black covers. We were instructed on how to use them to destroy the weeds that the haoles had brought over themselves. How ironic, yeah? The smell was poison on it’s own. I remember Otsan coming home with a nasty cough during the time, and the ground always looked sick. Now, we know that the plantations poisoned the ground with arsenic pesticides but at the time, it was just natural to not question the after affects and look only towards harvesting the most sugar in the cheapest fashion. The sugar cane just kept growing, the skinny stalks holding their ground in the wind, like menehune ready for battle against the soil (Cutler, et al).”

“When the railroad was built, I remember being so happy. We were catching up to the Mainland, and us immigrants had more freedom. We had the freedom of travel. We weren’t forced to stay on the plantation all the time. The Hilo Railroad seemed to be a way of escape for us. It was used for sugar transportation from the outskirts of Hilo to the port of Hilo, to be prepared to export to the Mainland. The railroad was destroyed during the 1946 tsunami and was never rebuilt, largely because it was expensive and the Big 5 was losing its hold on the economy. No more money, no more power. The damaged railroad was seen as wasted money. The abandoned railroad left broken scraps of metal all along the coast, like shattered pieces of the iron heart of the sugar plantation. You would see the little kids living in the collapsing plantation towns, making the railroad their own personal playground. The relationship with the a’ina was shifting. The Big 5 was losing power and they gave up on the sugar. Now look what is left, just the destroyed a’ina.”

*He stood up again and we walked away from the plantation with the mountain at our back. The sky had begun to clear, showing the luminous sun and vibrant sky. “I remember when I got out of the*

plantations. I would go up north, out of Hilo. I would walk on the vibrant a'ina, full of the sound of birds and the wind that moved the trees. I wanted my own piece of it." *As if on cue, the wind picked up, whispering his grey hair over his eyes,* "But not like this, I wanted my own piece of the new land. I knew the sugar wouldn't last. It could never last, with the exploitation, overuse, and corruption in the plantations. The Big 5 got too greedy and then they were shut out, as the environment collapsed around them from overuse and the sugar market moved elsewhere. What began to thrive was the tourism industry and the revival of the Hawaiian landscape."

"Even before the shift towards protecting the a'ina for the tourists, people were coming from the Mainland- even all over the world- just to see our little Hilo town. You knew they were tourists from their ugly Hawaiian shirts, fancy cameras around their neck and those imitation straw hats." *He laughed,* "Hilo changed from a main trading site to a booming tourist industry. Business shot up downtown, museums were created, and fake Hula dancers were so eager to portray the 'untouched' Hawaiian landscape (Steinberg 154). If only the tourists were able to see the real Hawaii, the long hours in the plantation, the stealing of the land from the Hawaiians, that history that contradicted the perfect picture that the tourists got. Hilo was only an opportunity for the tourists to briefly feel closer to nature rather than actually learn trying to help and protect Hawaii after all those years of destruction (Sutter 27). Even though some of the a'ina was restored, the roads disrupted the flow of nature. The bird's songs were dampened and the land was split. More land was taken from the Hawaiians. This land," *he pointed to the ground,* "and all of that" *he waved his hand towards the land near the glistening ocean,* "was all Hawaiian land. They took it and built resorts and parks to attract tourists (Batta, 61). The culture of Hilo changed, and the landscape changed too-and they change all the time- but at a scale and a rate that was scary. In all of Hilo history, the a'ina and the culture was continuously changing but when tourism industry took off, the a'ina changed before I was able to blink. (Cronon 14)."

“This culture extended to the National Parks too. I know you like Volcanoes National Park, and I confess, I too appreciate the peacefulness nature provides. We praise the land for being absent of humans, the freedom it gives us away from others. But the reason it exists is because we destroyed it before. We couldn't balance our relationship with the environment and we had to remake it and there can never be an absence of us, it is too late for that. We, the kama'aina, can view the land as though it was, as we had imagined.” *He said with a sense of nostalgia.* “ It preserves the endemic species, like the ‘Ohi’a<sup>30</sup> and the ‘I’iwi.<sup>31</sup> But it is also kapu for kama’aina to gain freedom to visit the sacred lands. The fences are a barrier for the people and confines the land of Pele into borders set by the government. Not everyone can celebrate the Hawaiian lands or visit Pele because the government restricts the nature that once filled this entire island (Steinberg, 150).”

*We approached the edge of a cliff, looking over to where the ocean and the small town of Hilo converged. The palm trees swayed softly on Hilo Bay, and the ocean reflected into the town, brightening the green landscape. The birds chirped, the grass rustled, and the wind sang in my ear. Pa spoke softly, “This is your a’ina and your home now, Mi-chan. You must care for it wisely. You must show aloha, show malama. On this very land- on the land we just walked- you saw how the way people treated the land changed over the years and you are now responsible for taking care of the land, like your ancestors did. We claim that the best a’ina is without people but that is not true. We must learn to value the a’ina with and without us, as humans are a part of the cycle of life as well. The a’ina is our ohana. Be akamai and remember- ua mau ke ea o ka aina i ka pono.<sup>32</sup>”*

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<sup>30</sup>*Metrosideros polymorpha*, native tree that blooms red flowers

<sup>31</sup> *Vestiaria coccinea*, endemic bird that feeds on ‘ohi’a

<sup>32</sup>“The land of life is perpetuated in righteousness,” well-known Hawaiian phrase



**Gary Ichino, a.k.a. "Pa," is my great-grandfather. He was born on the Honomu Sugar Plantation, which is just north of Hilo town, and in his early 20s, he left the plantation and began his own grocery store in Downtown Hilo.**

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