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PŪ‘OLO OF HOPE: THE POLITICS OF CARE FROM THE SHORES OF HAWAI‘I TO THE STREETS OF EUROPE**1

Abstract. *The convergence of multiple crises – from deepening economic inequality and deteriorating public health to climate collapse and the rise of authoritarian regimes – reveals the ever pressing need to reimagine our social, political and economic models. The dominant frameworks we continue to rely on – our concepts, ideals, metrics, institutions, and practices – are not just insufficient, but they are structurally incapable of addressing the depth, breadth, and complexity of the challenges we face. In response, the article explores care/mālama as foundational principles for a necessary paradigm shift. It examines the resurgence of Kanaka Maoli, or the Native Hawaiian world, exploring its relevance and transformative potential beyond its immediate context. Finally, the article shows the need to interpret and connect distinct, yet interrelated concepts and struggles so as to foster deeper understanding of our shared challenges and collective possibilities.*

Keywords: *Hawai‘i, Kānaka Maoli, politics, care, mālama, non-state spaces, pu‘uhonua.*

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, only a few semesters after completing my PhD, I was invited to participate in a major conference hosted by the University of San Francisco commemorating the 40th anniversary of the events of 1968. Entitled *The Great Rehearsal*,

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** Research article.

DOI: 10.51936/tip.62.2.341

¹ The author (2022–2023 Fulbright Scholar at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa) gratefully acknowledges support from the Fulbright Program. The views expressed here are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Fulbright Program. This article emerges from a broader body of work that began with the Fulbright project entitled “Listen to George Helm”: Kānaka Maoli Indigeneity Between Tradition and Innovation, conducted at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa during the 2022–2023 academic year. The author also received the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS) under Grant P5-0193, *Analysis of Work, Education, and Employment*.

the conference spanned a week of roundtables, lectures, discussions and other events focused on the global events of the long '68 and their lasting legacies. During the Q&A session following a lecture I gave on the intellectual and political legacy of Yugoslav praxis philosophy, Immanuel Wallerstein acknowledged my contribution but raised concerns about the use of neoliberalism as a framework for analysing contemporary political and economic trends. He argued that neoliberalism had become a "zombie concept", no longer relevant in the light of the evolving political and economic dynamics. Wallerstein also suggested that capitalism itself might be approaching an end, calling on us to confront an essential, if not the most crucial, question: are we capable of recognising the emergence of new social, political and economic forms among the existing social, political and economic conditions?

Although I did not fully grasp his argument at the time, later events clarified its importance. On one hand, Wallerstein's question stresses the need to denaturalise the hegemonic political and economic paradigm, highlighting its contingent and dynamic nature, and pointing to the constant flux and unpredictability that define social, political and economic systems. On the other hand, Wallerstein's intervention resonates with Pierre Bourdieu's argument that the social conditions of our time necessitate the creation of a new form of utopianism, one grounded in present-day social forces. As Pierre Bourdieu (in Bourdieu and Grass 2002, 67) contended, "We need to invent a new utopianism, rooted in contemporary social forces, for which – at risk of seeming to encourage a return to antiquated political visions – it will be necessary to create new kinds of movements". This notion calls on us to reconsider the possibilities of social transformation in the context of the current realities. It requires a shift from the realm of the inconceivable to the realm of the possible.

The idea of possibility is inherently speculative since it involves thinking about something not yet fully visible or realised, but on the way to emerging. In Western philosophy, as Ernst Bloch argues, most ideas focus on *All* (Alles) and *Nothing* (Nichts), whereby everything is either already complete or non-existent, leaving no room for possibilities (Bloch 1986; Bloch 2000). Bloch critiques this framework and introduces a new way of thinking – *anticipatory consciousness* – that challenges the static nature of Western philosophy and politics, which tend to overlook the idea of the possible. He claims the possible is frequently ignored, even though it holds the key to understanding new developments and opportunities in the world. To explore and contemplate possibilities, Bloch provides two valuable concepts: *Not* (Nicht) and *Not Yet* (Noch Nicht). These concepts are essential tools for identifying and reflecting on potential futures that have yet to materialise but remain possible. *Not* refers to the absence of something and the desire to overcome that absence, whereas *Not Yet* is more complex. It refers to something that exists as a potential or tendency – not fully formed, but moving toward becoming. *Not Yet* is the way in which the future is inscribed in the present. It is not an undefined or endless future, but a concrete

possibility that is unfolding. Or as Bloch succinctly summarises: “The Not in origin, the Not-Yet in history, the Nothing or conversely the All at the end” (Bloch 1986, 306).

The article begins with the premise that the convergence of crises – namely, the connection between economic inequality and deteriorating health, coupled with the links between climate collapse and the rise of authoritarianism – shows the urgent need to reimagine possibilities, such as new social, political and economic models. This entails a profound and unprecedented intellectual and political challenge given that conventional frameworks and criteria, i.e., our ideals, concepts, measures, institutions and practices, no longer align with the complex and urgent issues of today, failing to address the magnitude of the crises unfolding around us. Continuing to rely on these outdated standards simply adds to our failure to effectively address the profound existential threats and challenges we face. In his examination of palliative theory, Jairus Grove (2023) underscores the need to confront a difficult truth: we are entrenched in an unprecedented and irreversible planetary crisis. Precisely for this reason, he argues, palliative politics becomes not only relevant but essential. Rather than a mere stopgap, it represents a strategic and tactical shift that enables resistance to despair and the pull of survivalist logics. As such, palliative politics should be understood as a vital element within a broader project of social transformation. It fosters spaces of refuge – sites where care, empathy and solidarity are able to not just emerge but be meaningfully sustained.

In this context, the concept of care and/or *mālama* is introduced as a foundational principle and practice of the emerging political, social and economic models. The article examines the resurgence of Kanaka Maoli, or the Native Hawaiian world, exploring its relevance and transformative potential beyond its immediate context.² In doing so, it offers a more nuanced exploration of the epistemological differences between modalities of care and forms of self-governance in Hawaiian and European contexts. We highlight the necessity of interpreting and connecting distinct yet interrelated concepts and struggles in order to foster a deeper understanding of our shared challenges and collective possibilities. Finally, we explore how the concept and practice of care call for the emergence of new political forms that exist both beyond and beneath the traditional state structures.

To conclude this introduction, it is necessary to briefly explain and contextualise the title. We draw on the metaphor of the *pū'olo*, or a leaf-wrapped bundle, from George Terry Kanalu Young's exploration of the complexities of the Native Hawaiian past. In his analysis of the epistemological differences between the 'Ōiwi Maoli (Native Hawaiian) worldview and Western frameworks that have sought to interpret – and, at times, marginalise – it, he writes:

² The diacritical mark *kahakō* is used in Kānaka Maoli and Kānaka when referring to Native Hawaiian people, but is omitted when Kanaka Maoli is used as an adjective.

The ‘Oiwi Maoli past can be thought of as a pū‘olo or “leaf- wrapped bundle.” All the bygone eras that comprise that past are held in the pū‘olo. Memory stored the pū‘olo’s contents as ‘ike or “knowledge.” ‘Ike was shared based on specific tasks. It was passed from one generation to another through the constant medium of practice. ‘Ike could be spoken, chanted, or expressed through gestures as with hula. Consequently, to look and listen were the primary ways to learn. (Young 1998/2012, 13)

We view it as a meaningful metaphor in its original sense, with the past as a bundle that encompasses diverse forms of knowledge and expression. Moreover, it serves as a fitting metaphor in another context since the *pū‘olo* is the traditional way gifts are presented in Hawai‘i. The ideas explored here are, in many ways, gifts – received through ongoing encounters and dialogues with Kanaka Maoli scholars, activists, community leaders, and other community members whose perspectives critically inform this study. To reflect this dialogical perspective, each section has two parts, addressing the concepts and practices of care, as well as places of refuge, in both European and Hawaiian contexts.

DIALOGUE: THE RECIPROCAL OBLIGATION

In engaging with the politics of care across its various modalities and contexts, we align with the argument presented by Noelani Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua and Kenneth Gofigan Kuper (2024), who assert that amid the global climate crisis dialogue should be approached as a practice of reciprocal obligations. The authors argue that this strengthens our collective capacity to confront the existential challenges encountered by both humanity as a whole and specific communities. By drawing connections across diverse epistemic frameworks and distinct social, political and cultural contexts, we aim to open up possibilities for dialogical politics and collective transformation. Importantly, this effort does not centre on the naive and romanticised notion of “cross-cultural exchange”. Instead, it calls for a profound and shared reimagining of decolonial futures – plural, yet inclusive. In so doing, we seek to deepen our understanding of shared struggles and amplify “these small pockets of good” (Kotubetey in Hitt 2015, 11), weaving them together in pursuit of more equitable, sustainable and just futures.

Aware of the inherent challenges of translation – particularly theoretical translation – and especially of the ways concepts and practices may ‘escape translation’, we regard seriously the cautionary insights of Kanaka Maoli scholars who warn against approaching the Hawaiian world via the frameworks imposed by *haole* (non-native) writers and translators; namely, frameworks that have frequently led not merely to misrepresentation and mistranslation, but to efforts to contain and domesticate Hawaiian ways of being (Osorio 2021; Kuwada 2009). Accordingly, we resist the inclination to define Kanaka Maoli concepts and practices, recognising that such efforts often “create the illusion of capturing the fullness” (Osorio 2021, 36) of their articulations. Our refusal to define stems not

simply from the linguistic differences between 'ōlelo Hawai'i and English but, more importantly, from recognition of the epistemic violence that such translation practices can enact. Nevertheless, we seek to initiate a conversation that too often has been missing – one grounded in respect and relationality, rather than appropriation or containment. In this respect, the article builds on the assumption that meaningful dialogue between European and Native Hawaiian political traditions is not only possible, but valuable.

Similarly, David Graeber (2001; 2004; 2007; 2020; 2024) contends that dialogue is a collective effort to reconcile divergent perspectives within practical situations of action. Graeber's "commitment to carry on the conversation", to organise (thinking) around the concept of dialogue in order to "patch together a shared sense of humanity", is the guiding thread connecting different strands of his political theory. Graeber makes this argument clearer while stating that "questions of cultural difference only become relevant when there's already some sort of conversation going on. There is no reason to ask oneself how and whether one is to sit in judgment on another person's cultural universe unless you have some idea what that universe is; and that means that people are, to some degree at least, already communicating" (2007, 288). With this in mind, following Graeber we turn to the idea of dialogical politics as a "mutual recognition of, and respect for, difference founded on the recognition of an even more fundamental similarity (hence, equality) that makes such recognition possible" (ibid., 289–90).

In his widely referenced essay on communism, Graeber uses language to reinforce his argument for "baseline communism" where communication is inherently cooperative, implying a shared responsibility toward one's interlocutor. While such an idea may provoke strong reactions, Graeber seeks to move our attention away from abstract and theoretical discussions toward a more practical, accessible engagement with the concept. He contends that, over time, collective thinking and dialogic practice have been replaced by the isolated, monastic self, maintained by scholars and activists alike. In contrast, Graeber argues that knowing things together is a direct outcome of doing things together. Some of these ideas we already find in *Fragments of Anarchist Anthropology* in which he elaborates on exilic spaces as communities of purpose and not of definition, i.e., they are defined by practice, which revolves, in turn, around the "dialogical principle".

At the very heart of dialogue is the reciprocal obligation and thus an effort to figure out, collectively, how to reconcile different, even incommensurable perspectives in a practical situation of action. Dialogic politics makes it possible to start from a common commitment to action, not a shared definition of reality. Much like feminism, in a dialogical and consensual process, the general is brought to serve the purpose of the specific, with people from radically different realities creating pragmatic unities over particular courses of action. In politics, dialogue is a primary building block, it is a form of emergence of thoughts that are collective.

The mentioned epistemological and political obligation becomes even more critical when placing diverse forms of care and politics of care into dialogue. Within the colonialism context, the ambivalent nature of care becomes particularly evident as it was frequently entangled with the colonial logics of domination and exploitation. More specifically, Narayan (1995) notes that care discourses were strategically used to justify colonial practices, sometimes masking their exploitative nature under the guise of benevolence. She points to the “self-serving collaboration between elements of colonial rights discourses and care discourse” (ibid., 133), suggesting that the “care discourse runs the risk of being used to ideological ends where the ‘differences’ are defined in self-serving ways by the dominant and powerful” (ibid., 136). In her analysis of contemporary Hawai‘i, Haunani Kay-Trask (1999, 143) stresses how Kanaka Maoli values, including the principle of *mālama*, remain vulnerable to ongoing exploitation and commodification. For instance, she observes: “The phrase, *mālama ‘āina* – ‘to care for the land’ – is used by government officials to promote new projects and convince locals that hotels can be constructed with an emphasis on ‘ecology.’ Hotel historians, like hotel doctors, are stationed on-site to pacify visitors, feeding them fabricated myths and tales of the ‘primitive’”.

Her argument echoes Said’s (1978) assertion that colonial exploitation was not solely reliant on military and administrative power, but also perpetuated by a wide range of institutions, techniques, practices and discourses that extended far beyond the repressive apparatus. This network included philanthropists, educators, medical professionals, social workers, and clergy, who at times passively, other times actively, collaborated in the destructive colonial project. They played an integral part in the (re)production of colonial power, shaping the identities, bodies and minds of the natives in ways that served colonial interests and desires. Their efforts to “help”, “develop”, “civilise” or “socialise” indigenous populations had crippling effects, rendering the natives more governable while simultaneously eroding their connection to their ancestral lands, cultures and histories.³ This historical backdrop explains why care (especially care from outside) continues to arouse scepticism and distrust among indigenous communities worldwide. For example, Kānaka Maoli continue to resist occasional efforts to regulate hand-pounded *poi* or *pa‘i‘ai* (undiluted, hand-pounded taro) on the guise of health and hygiene concerns. Similarly, the Zapatistas have respectfully rejected “pink stilettos” – both literally and metaphorically – seeing them as symbols of care that patronises and fails to recognise the realities of Zapatista communities living in the mud of the Lacandon jungle.

In exploring how the concept of care travels, Joan Tronto (2020, 181) asks a crucial question: “Can the conceptual framework of ‘caring democracy’ be

³ The colonial project, often cloaked in the discourse of humanitarianism, was ultimately driven by the subjugation of indigenous peoples. It employed a range of violent strategies, including genocide, terricide and epistemicide. See Toplak (2025) and Vrečko-Ilc (2025).

applied beyond the time and place where it first emerged?”. This rhetorical question has served as a critical intervention in the growing debates on care in recent years. Tronto challenges the tendency to apply care ethics across diverse cultural contexts without sufficient attention to local idiosyncrasies and historical traditions. In the absence of such reflexivity and an understanding of the broader contexts in which care relations take shape, “they can end up being harmful or counterproductive if they give in to categories that appear universal or neutral but are not so” (ibid., 189).

Similarly, Graeber (2024, 304–306) points out the conceptual ambiguity of care, emphasising that it can take many forms – not all of which are benevolent. He argues that even prisons, which provide food and shelter to prisoners, can be seen as institutions that ‘care’ for them, but asks whether it is appropriate to regard institutions of this sort as spaces of care. Emejulu and Bassel (2018, 117) also caution against the ambivalence of care, describing it as “a double-edged sword of domination and resistance”, adding that care is “a politics of becoming”. Specifically, the mechanisms, policies, discourses, practices, institutions and technologies related to care can reinforce different modalities of care and politics. These range from care for others (including self-care) as “a posture of mutual respect, responsibility and obligation” (Brown and Woodly 2021, 891), to careless care, or what Harris (2021) refers to as the “pantomime of care”. Namely, care can be viewed as palliative on one hand, and as an investment, business opportunity, or even a form of domination on the other.⁴

WAYS OF CARING

In the aftermath of the transformative social and political upheavals of the long '68, truly innovative feminist approaches to care began to take shape in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Their ethical frameworks departed from conventional moral theories and liberal political philosophies, which traditionally had been rooted in abstract principles, rationality, and individualistic notions of justice. In contrast, feminist scholars and activists drew attention to a more relational and contextual understanding of justice, emphasising the importance of emotions, interconnectedness, and the practice of care (cf. May 2023, 41–42).

Academic exploration of the concept of care gained significant momentum with foundational works by Ruddick (1980), Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984), which are often viewed as pioneering works in the field. These early inquiries into care primarily situated the concept within moral philosophy and normative political theory. However, it is important to recognise that the initial discussions surrounding the ethics and practice of care emerged from within the context of

⁴ Sevenhuijsen (2003, 141) asserts that power and conflict are intrinsic to every stage of the care-giving process, as well as in the broader societal discussions on how social institutions should care for individuals. In this regard, Tronto (1993: 171) argues that the theory and politics of care must be grounded in a theory of justice, emphasising that care should be inherently democratic in nature. She warns that without such a foundation, “[i]t would be very easy for nondemocratic form of care to emerge”.

second-wave feminism, which brought with it distinct theoretical frameworks and political objectives. Feminist scholars and activists were instrumental in critiquing the invisibility and privatisation of care work, which had long been relegated to the domestic sphere and was often seen as a natural, unacknowledged duty, notably for women. The distribution of caring tasks between men and women was seen as deeply asymmetrical, with women shouldering the majority of caregiving responsibilities both within the household and in broader social structures. Alongside addressing these gendered inequalities, feminist theorists also stressed the central role played by reproductive labour in the functioning of contemporary capitalist economies. Reproductive work, including caregiving, child-rearing, and domestic labour, was ever more recognised as foundational for the reproduction of the workforce and the broader economy, yet remained largely undervalued and unrecognised.

Discussions about care were further encouraged by the entrenchment of neoliberalism and considerably redefinition and redistribution of the state associated with it. The effects of these processes have been fatal for the welfare state and public care systems because they have led to 'endemic care deficits'. As Care Collective (2020, 10) notes, the neoliberal policies of privatisation, liberalisation and fiscal discipline have proven disastrous for care systems (both state and private) as profit-making has been posited as the fundamental guiding principle: "While enabling certain models of market-mediated and commoditized care, neoliberalism seriously undermines all forms of care and caring that do not serve its agenda of profit extraction for the few". We should not forget that the economic innovations of the last four decades have actually had more important political than economic impacts. Graeber (2013, 281) states that the attack on regular forms of employment does not make workers more productive, whereas precarisation successfully tames and depoliticises labour. Similarly, the extension of working time, which adds little to productivity and does much more to limit political activity, organising and, as we will see below, time for democracy and time for care.

In recent years, considerable social, political and economic changes have driven a noteworthy conceptual expansion and repoliticisation of care. These shifts have led scholars and activists to increasingly recognise care not merely as a private or personal concern but as a central political and ethical issue. As a direct result of these changes, the politics and ethics of care have been explored via a variety of new lenses, each offering fresh perspectives on how care can be re-envisioned in response to evolving needs and challenges. For example, care has been explored as mutual aid (Spade 2020), underscoring the importance of collective responsibility and community support; as accompaniment (Farmer 2013; Lynd 2012), which emphasises solidarity and shared experiences in addressing social inequities; as friendship (May 2012; Schwarzenbach 2009), which shows care's role in cultivating emotional and relational connections; or as camaraderie (Dean 2019), focusing on solidarity and shared goals.

To be precise, the social dimension of care has been present ever since the first discussions on the care ethics, as Gilligan (1982/2003, 62), for instance, understands care as “an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connections so that no one is left alone”. And yet, in recent decades we have witnessed slow shifts in discussions on care, and we could also say its (re)politicisation, given that the focus has moved from domestic care and childcare to the new scales and structural conditions of care. According to Brown and Woodly (2021), “[t]he present moment invites a re-engagement with care as a political theory, an ethic and a political praxis that reorients people toward new ways of living, relating, and governing”. In the late 1980s, Tronto (1987) conceptualised care in the context of the decline of the welfare state, the crisis of representation and social security systems and, finally, the inherent contradictions of neoliberalism.

But what does care really mean? Fisher and Tronto define it as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Fisher and Tronto 1990, 40). What is novel about their reconceptualisation is the processual and holistic dimension of care, which identifies four analytically distinct, but interconnected phases of the care process: caring about, caring for, caregiving, and care-receiving. Even though the theoretical expansions of care outlined above have significantly enriched political thought, they remain largely embedded within epistemological and ontological frameworks shaped by Western liberal tradition. The following discussion engages with Native Hawaiian articulations of *mālama*, drawing attention to key differences in how care is conceptualised, approached and practised.

In Hawaiian tradition, the story of Hāloa, which traces the beginnings of the Hawaiian people, underlines the deep bond between humans and the natural world. *Wakea*, the Sky Father, and *Papa*, the Earth Mother, creators of the Hawaiian islands, had a daughter named *Ho'ohokukalani*, meaning “the heavenly one who made the stars”. After *Ho'ohokukalani*'s first pregnancy ended in miscarriage, her stillborn son *Hāloa* was wrapped in *kapa*, placed in a woven *lauhala* basket, and buried in the *āina*. Overcome with grief, *Ho'ohokukalani* mourned deeply, crying and chanting, watering the grave with her tears. From this burial site, a delicate yet resilient plant began to grow. With broad, heart-shaped leaves, this plant came to be known as *kalo* (taro). As the plant matured, it produced an *'oha*, or corm, which could be harvested and replanted to initiate a new life cycle. The *kalo* plant thus symbolises not just the cyclical nature of life, death and rebirth, but the concept of *'ohana* (family) as well.

When *Ho'ohokukalani* conceived again, she gave birth to a healthy son, whom she also named *Hāloa* in memory of her firstborn. The *kalo* plant nourished and fed her second son, who became the first Hawaiian *ali'i* (chief) and it is from him that Hawaiians trace their lineage. In Hawai'i, the native people are understood

as *keiki o ka ʻāina* or *kamaʻāina*, meaning “children of the land”, while the taro plant, seen as the elder sibling, serves as both a metaphor and a reminder of the need to nurture the land and its resources (in return, the land sustains and nurtures the people). Namely, taro is not only the staple crop of Hawaiian people, but also a symbol of the profound, sacred connection between the people and the land, a relationship that demands care.⁵ This *moʻolelo* or story underscores key values within Hawaiian culture: *aloha* (love, affection, kindness), *laulima* (collaboration) and *mālama* (care or stewardship), all of which are essential for the survival and well-being of Kānaka Maoli. In line with Osorio (2021), it may be important to reconceptualise these terms as active verbs, thereby stressing their practical and transformative nature. Specifically, *aloha* should be understood as “loving and respecting”, signifying an ongoing, relational process that fosters solidarity and the creation of relationships; *laulima* as “working with others”, highlighting the collaborative effort essential to Hawaiian life; and *mālama* as “caring” or “nurturing”, pointing to the responsibility to protect and sustain the land, people and culture.

Illustrating the profound interconnection between these values, a recent example stands out: the protection of Mauna Kea. To gain a deeper understanding of the broader issue, we begin by considering the personal story of a young Hawaiian activist, which offers insight into the larger context and struggles at play. The cover of the November 2019 issue of *FLUX Hawaiʻi*, a prominent publication focused on arts, culture, and current affairs in Hawaiʻi, featured a photo of Pumehana Lā, a young Kanaka Maoli student activist. Mauna a Wākea, also known as Mauna Kea, is regarded as a sacred mountain for Native Hawaiians, yet the construction of the Thirty-Meter Telescope (TMT) had been set to begin on its peak earlier that year. Pumehana journeyed to the *Puʻuhonua o Puʻuhuluhulu* sanctuary on the Mauna, joining the *kiaʻi mauna* (protectors of the mountain) to defend their ancestral connections to the mountain, while simultaneously defying outsiders’ expectations concerning how indigeneity should be performed – i.e., how it should look, sound, or behave. Dressed in a military jacket, cut-off denim shorts, wearing work boots and, while on stage, performing *na mele paleoleo*, a contemporary form of Hawaiian music that cuts and mixes hip hop with the traditional Hawaiian mele, she revealed the cultural and political terrain that mostly goes unnoticed or, at best, is ignored. Pumehana’s approach to both music and activism shows the complex and evolving nature of Indigenous identity in contemporary contexts, challenging narrow stereotypes and expanding the ways in which Indigenous youth engage with and express their cultural and political values.

⁵ For an in-depth exploration of the enduring cultural significance of taro in relation to the performativity of Kanaka Maoli indigeneity, see McGregor (2007), Kanehe (2014), Aikau (2019), Fujikane (2021) and Hobart (2023).

Put differently, today Native Hawaiian activists, scholars, cultural practitioners, artists, writers, designers, and community organisers draw upon the past to (re)invent alternative frames of reference. This makes it crucial to detect the immanent possibilities within Native Hawaiian indigeneity where the regeneration of connections with sacred places, ancestors and traditions is not merely a means of preserving cultural heritage but also a way of prefiguring alternative, decolonial futures. Kay-Trask (1999, 42) argues that the rejections of Hawaiian cultural assertion, by claiming it is a spurious invention for political ends only, implicitly suggest that Native Hawaiians do not in fact know their culture well enough to assert, let alone develop, it. This raises several important questions for our understanding of the Native Hawaiian idea and practice of care: Where and how are these articulations expressed and understood? How can we approach the complex processes of (re)articulating Native Hawaiian indigeneity, its performativity and care?

To address these questions, a “transversal” approach is necessary. To fully understand how the practice of *mālama* (care) and *kuleana* (responsibility) is integral to nurturing relationships with the land, community and ancestors, it is vital to move beyond Western conceptions of care. In particular, it is important to map out various forms, contexts, and time periods, encompassing not just the main domains of Hawaiian cultural revitalisation and politics, but also performances “on the fringe”, as Teves (2019) describes indigeneity (re)articulated in countercultural or alter/native spaces. We should thus engage with the wide range of concepts and practices that embody *mālama*, which have contributed to the “resurgence of a Hawaiian world” (Silva 2017), including music and seafaring, design and literature, chant and taro cultivation, lei and hula, as well as memory, vision, stories and rituals. Engaging with the cultural dimensions of Hawaiian politics and collective action, together with the politics embedded in Hawaiian culture, the study of Native Hawaiian practices of *mālama* should examine its simultaneous stasis and change, presupposed compliance and persistent disobedience, as well as their traditions and fluidity. We should also explore how the resurgence of Kanaka Maoli political, social and economic models, rooted in practices of generosity, sharing, and reciprocity, can inform political, cultural and economic transformations elsewhere. In other words, we should analyse how Native Hawaiian values and practices of care can help us transform the way we live and work, consume and produce in response to the magnitude and scope of global environmental challenges.

More than 125 years after the imposition of external rule, the practice of *mālama* not only endures but continues to thrive as a vital source of cultural and political resilience. In the context of global climate collapse, practices of *mālama* – and more specifically, *mālama ʻāina* (to care for the land) – offer critical insights that extend far beyond the shores of Hawai'i. Here we should stress that the Western notion of land is insufficient to fully capture its meaning in the Hawaiian context. Literally meaning “that which feeds”, the Hawaiian

term *‘āina* encompasses not simply land but the ocean, waters and sky as well. It resists being reduced to Western, land-centric epistemologies since it is not merely soil or earth, nor simply a place or commodity, but a dynamic process – at once a relationship and a source of life. Emphasising the ontological connection between Native Hawaiians and their environment, Ingersoll (2016) introduces the “seascape epistemology” concept to underscore the ocean’s role in Kanaka epistemology and ontology. This approach “builds upon these concepts and provides a decolonizing methodology for Kānaka by revealing hidden linkages between water and land that speak to Indigenous ways of knowing and being, as well as to historical strategies for political, social, and cultural survival” (Ingersoll 2016, 20).

Today, Native Hawaiian scholars, activists, and community leaders claim that it is their *kuleana* (responsibility or obligation) to share these lessons with the global community, affirming Osorio’s (2021, 25) argument that “Kanaka understandings of self-determination are rooted in interdependence rather than independence”. One of the most powerful examples of this ethos is the Polynesian Voyaging Society (PVS) that launched the *Mālama Honua Worldwide Voyage* in 2013. Over the course of six years (2013–2019), this educational initiative undertook a global voyage with the double-hulled canoes *Hōkūle‘a* and *Hikianalia* to promote Indigenous knowledge, foster cultural renewal, and advocate ecological sustainability. Practising the ancient art of wayfinding – “On board, there is no compass, sextant, or cellphone, watch, or GPS for direction. In wayfinding, the sun, moon, and stars are a map that surrounds the navigators. When clouds and storms make it impossible to see that map, wave patterns, currents, and animal behavior give a navigator directional clues to find tiny islands in the vast ocean” (PVS 2013) – the crew travelled more than 60,000 nautical miles, visited over 150 ports, and engaged with more than 100,000 people across eighteen nations. Ten years later, the PVS launched *Moananuiākea: A Voyage for Earth* (2023–2027), *Hōkūle‘a*’s 15th major voyage in her 50-year history. This journey reaffirms and expands the commitment to *mālama ‘āina*, sharing Indigenous knowledge not only as a mode of cultural survival but as a model for planetary stewardship, too.

At the core of Hōkūle‘a’s creation was exploration – to uncover, recover, and reclaim. Reclaim our culture, traditions, and our relationship to home and our island earth. Moananuiākea is no different, but we are now guided by what the worldwide voyage told us – that we must deepen our values in the voyage and move from exploration and understanding to mālama, or caring, and kuleana, or taking responsibility. With those values, we must move discovery toward choices and actions that we believe will help build a future good enough for our children. This is our most difficult voyage yet because the destination is not ours. It will be the most difficult island yet to find, because it is the future of island earth. (PVS 2023)

Nainoa Thompson, President of the Polynesian Voyaging Society and a *pwo* navigator – in fact, the first Native Hawaiian since the 14th century to practise *wayfinding*, the art and science of ancient non-instrument navigation for long-distance ocean voyaging – offers a transformative perspective on the Kānaka Maoli–external world relationship. Despite the enduring impacts of colonial dispossession, Thompson suggests the outside world should be regarded as students, and Hawai'i as a school. As he often asks, “What if we taught them how we *mālama* Hawai'i, so when they go home, they can *mālama* their own families and places?” (cf. De Fries 2020, 87). While it is precisely the spatial dimension of care that plays a pivotal role in its recent rearticulations, this aspect is frequently underexplored in scholarship on the politics of care.

“SMALL POCKETS OF GOOD”

Julie Anne White (2020) argues that we are living in an era dominated by the ruthless prioritisation of “productive time”. In response, she calls for a fundamental redefinition of democracy – one grounded in a new conception of citizenship and care. This reimagining would require the establishing of a different ‘temporal regime’, shifting emphasis from ‘productive time’ to ‘caring time’. However, as we explore below, this also entails the emergence of new spatial forms of political membership and collective care. In the context of the decline of the welfare state and ongoing austerity, the burdens and possibilities of political engagement and care are unevenly distributed. Today, democratic participation and the capacity to care are shaped by the temporal logics of neoliberalism – available primarily to those with the financial means to afford them. This dynamic produces a ‘time deficit’ that is not just unequally distributed, but also systematically excludes many from both political and caregiving processes. As a result, democracy is ever more restricted to the privileged few while care is commodified, shaped by market forces, and reduced to an individual’s economic capacity.

People who care – *homines curans* – require more time for democratic participation and caregiving. They accordingly need new political, social and economic models grounded in alternative temporal and spatial regimes: *caring time* and *places of care*. This explains why Graeber proposed a new labour theory of value that begins with social production and caring labour. In his view, factory work is a secondary form of labour, whereas activities like education and nursing are central to the broader processes of mutual aid and care that make social life – and ultimately all other forms of work – possible. Such forms of relational labour are foundational, not peripheral. One of the most pressing intellectual and political challenges, Graeber argues, is to “get rid of the terms production and consumption as a basis for political economy” (Graeber 2020, 57). Instead of building new shopping malls and factories, he suggests we should focus on creating “museums of care” – spaces that “do not celebrate production of any sort but rather provide the space and means for the creation of social relationships and the imagining of entirely new forms of social relations” (Graeber 2024, 306).

As discussed in previous work (cf. Vodovnik 2021), democratic and caring politics has long held a complicated relationship with the state because it aligns more closely with the philosophical concept of praxis – understood as a free and creative activity in smaller, more autonomous spaces. Only in our present has politics been integrated into state-making projects and strengthened the belief that there is no distinction between the political and statist realms. One might even argue that political theory frequently interprets politics in overly literal terms, particularly when we consider the etymology of the word ‘real’, which derives from the Latin *regalis*, meaning royal or king’s. This historical connection suggests that, within much of traditional political theory, only what is deemed ‘royal’ – that is, what exists within the ontological framework structured by sovereign power – can be regarded as truly ‘real’. Consequently, alternative forms of political organisation, such as counter-hegemonic and autonomous politics, are often dismissed or marginalised as trivial, unrealistic or peripheral. This narrow conception of politics, privileging the state and sovereign authority as the only legitimate sites of power, reinforces a hierarchical understanding of political agency. It not only excludes non-state forms of political life but also delegitimises efforts to create spaces outside the reach of state sovereignty where alternative forms of care, governance, and social organisation can flourish.

In *The Art of Not Being Governed* – a work that has significantly reshaped the way we theorise state-making projects and non-state spaces – James C. Scott advances a provocative thesis. He contends that the production of what he labels “synoptic legibility” (Scott 2009; Scott 1998) lies at the heart of state-making projects. Central to this process are state efforts to render populations legible, thereby facilitating essential state functions like taxation, conscription, and the monopolisation of coercive power. These efforts have consistently relied on a range of strategies and policies aimed at sedentarising and exerting control over mobile or otherwise unruly populations, whose autonomy poses a persistent challenge to state authority. The places of refuge, or more aptly, exilic spaces, are often overlooked in discussions of politics, capitalist development, and societal change. Still, this neglect is unsurprising given that these places are chiefly understood as sanctuaries for marginalised groups. However, this view is a significant oversight. Exilic spaces must be recognised as integral to the economic structuring and reorganisation of the global capitalist system and the dynamics of political power.⁶

Similarly, in a brief albeit incisive outline of his monumental four-volume work *De l’État* (1976–78), Henri Lefebvre argues the modern state is fundamentally grounded in the “principle of equivalence”, a mechanism that ensures unity, identity, and political integration. In his pondering on the state of the modern world, he counters prevailing Marxist theorisations of the state that perceived

⁶ These spaces are not static; they are constantly in a process of being (re)constructed and (de)composed through a variety of, at first glance, seemingly unrelated tactics and strategies.

the state as a form of “heavenly life” in contrast to the “earthly life” of civil society where man “regards other men as means, degrades himself to a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers” (Marx in Lefebvre 2009, 75). Lefebvre notes:

Foundations of the modern State: The (forced) equivalence of non-equivalents: the (forced) equalization of the unequal, the identification of the non-identical ... The logic of homogenization and identity as the logic and strategy of State power. The State as reducer (of diversities, autonomies, multiplicities, differences) and as integrator of the so-called national whole. (ibid., 108)

This argument calls for further exploration of the paradox inherent in state politics – where the state operates as both forces of reduction and integration. More importantly, it shows the critical need to shift our focus to non-state spaces as essential arenas of political engagement. Grubačić and O'Hearn (2016), for instance, frame non-state spaces as “exilic spaces” characterised by communities attempting to (in)voluntarily escape both state regulation and the imperatives of capitalist accumulation. These exilic spaces can be understood as domains within social and economic life where individuals and groups actively seek to extricate themselves from capitalist processes – by either physically retreating to autonomous territories or striving to create structures that resist capitalist accumulation and social control. Such spaces are critical to the politics of care as they challenge state-sanctioned and capitalist frameworks of social organisation and offer alternative models of communal life and support. To flesh out this point, let us consider one example – although the list is extensive.

For instance, when the global assembly movement erupted onto the political scene in 2011 – sparking nearly 1,400 encampments around the world – the exilic nature of these camps was not immediately recognised. In Ljubljana, the sterile and uninviting plaza in front of the Ljubljana Stock Exchange (*borza*) was transformed into a permanent tent city – an act of reclaiming the commons and enacting new forms of political subjectivity and collective politics. During the 15 October 2011 (“15O”) protests – a global day of anti-austerity action – a symbolic *détournement* occurred: the letter “R” fell off the façade of *BORZA* and was replaced with an improvised “J” to form the phrase *BOJ ZA*, which in Slovenian means “a struggle for”. This transformation was more than linguistic and marked a shift in political logic. Whereas earlier protests were typically defined by opposition – crafting strategies in response to perceived adversaries – this emerging logic reoriented political action around its transformative potential for the participants themselves. Protest was no longer simply a struggle *against* hegemonic structures of power, but increasingly a struggle *for* new ways of living, relating and organising – politically, socially and economically.

Central to this and other encampments was not merely the visual and spatial manifestation of an alternative polity, but additionally the embodied practice of

care – where mutual support, solidarity, and collective well-being became founding principles. In these ‘small pockets of good’, a new form of political membership emerged that, among others, challenged private property, the fragmentation of domestic life, and exclusion of minorities. Reflecting on the “spatialization of global power projects”, Sassen argues that reclaimed spaces offer a unique political advantage, serving as “far more concrete space for politics than that of the nation. It becomes a place where nonformal political actors can be part of the political scene in a way that is much more difficult at the national level” (Sassen 2001, 19). Due to their immediacy and accessibility, these “museums of care”, as Graeber (2024) would call them, provide marginalised groups, outsiders, discriminated minorities, and other *etceteras* of neoliberalism with the opportunity to assert their presence – not only in relation to power but with each other as well. Rooted in mutual aid, such spaces signal the potential for a new type of politics, one centred on care, interdependence, and collective responsibility (*ibid.*).

Put differently, sufficiently autonomous and distanced from capitalist society, these spaces foster an alternative understanding of polity that moves beyond the vague concept of identity, regardless of its inclusivity, and instead stresses relationality and collective action. In the face of the escalating climate collapse and unprecedented global crises, the concept of exilic spaces emerges as a crucial response to the shortcomings of the current political frameworks. It points to decolonial futures that reimagine the organisation of social, political and economic life – futures rooted in care, reciprocity, and collective responsibility, as so urgently needed to confront today’s intertwined environmental and societal crises.

In examining the enduring impact of colonialism, Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2010, 97) introduces a crucial analytical distinction between colonialism and coloniality. He argues that the concept of coloniality allows us to grasp how colonial forms of domination persist long after the formal end of colonial administrations. He distinguishes colonialism from coloniality as follows:

Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation ... Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience.

Within the Hawaiian context, Kanaka Maoli scholars and activists emphasise the cultivation of *pu‘uhonua* – places of refuge that offer protection from punitive authority and serve as sites of healing – spaces that transcend mere

physical or spatial dimensions. As Yamashiro and Goodyear-Ka'ōpua (2014, 5) explain, *pu'uhonua* are not just physical sites but vital practices of healing, protection and relationality:

Pu'uhonua. Critical to revaluing ourselves and our stories, to healing the pain within ourselves and communities, are concerted efforts to honor and create sacred and safe spaces. Pu'uhonua, or sanctuaries, are not limited to religious buildings. A person, a community, or a natural landform can be a pu'uhonua ... [T]he authors urge us to find and nurture pu'uhonua in unexpected places – in our food, our prisons, our schools, our cities, and our mountains. By renewing sacred connections between the health of the land and the health of our bodies we can create a safer and more resilient world for our children.

While the term's conceptual breadth is essential to assure a fuller understanding of Kanaka Maoli politics and projects, it should not be interpreted as minimising the importance of physical and spatial dimensions. Viewing Hawai'i via the lens of coloniality permits us to move beyond the superficial imagery of plastic leis, gleaming shopping malls, and resort façades designed for *malihini* (foreigners). This perspective exposes the ongoing dispossession of Hawaiian lands and the displacement of Kānaka Maoli, who are often forced to leave the islands due to the high living costs. The lands that remain are continually threatened by the tourist industry, settler colonialism, and militarisation.

In 2019, following the announcement that construction of the controversial TMT would proceed, *kia'i* assembled at the base of Mauna Kea to protect the mountain. As Kuwada and Revilla (2020, 518) argue, at the heart of the dispute was, in fact, a clash of ontologies. While the media dismissed Native Hawaiian cultural and environmental concerns as superstitious – reinforcing stereotypes of a static, ahistorical culture – protectors were actively asserting and defending their genealogical connections to the mountain in innovative ways (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua 2017; Arvin 2019). The protectors established *Pu'uhonua o Pu'uhuluhulu*, where *kapu aloha* – a protocol of disciplined, non-violent resistance, “a commitment to act with aloha” (Case 2020), “a form of commitment to *pono*, or what is right and just” (Hulleman in Cornum 2021) – served as a foundational ethical and political framework. Ahia (2020, 609) argues that the *pu'uhonua* can be understood as “an autonomous zone, a social justice experiment in community empowerment, a *kauhale* [home] village, an *'ohana* [family]”. Abad and Gonzales (2020, 199) stress the exilic character of the *pu'uhonua*, highlighting its escape from both capitalist accumulation and state control:

[P]eople could see for themselves an orderly community functioning well under clear rules and inclusive roles. They saw how the community-resourced pu'uhonua provided free food, free health care, free education, free child care, free kupuna care, and shelter for all who were greeted warmly by its embrace.

The hundreds of thousands of dollars the TMT spent to blanket the airwaves with paid ads could not dampen what the community was creating out in thin air.

As previously discussed (Vodovnik and Grubačić 2015), we can analyse non-state spaces of this kind in a micropolitical sense, focusing on their infrapolitical character. The concept of infrapolitics helps illuminate politics that do not look like politics or, better, the often-overlooked political aspects of the *pu'uhonua*, which “like infrared rays” are “beyond the visible end of the spectrum”. These spaces, communities and practices are often “invisible... in large part by design – a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power” (Scott 1990, 201).⁷ Yet, in its macropolitical sense, the *pu'uhonua* should be understood as a process of creating place-based forms of decolonial politics within the cracks of the global capitalist system. It involves the production of autonomous, partially incorporated spaces, breaking from systemic processes of state and capital. As such, they are a predictable response to the enduring logic of exit and capture, deeply embedded in the unyielding resistance of the Kānaka Maoli against colonial domination. In her reflections on *Pu'uhonua o Pu'uhuluhulu*, Goodyear-Ka'ōpua (in Cornum, 2021) points out new forms of Kānaka autonomy and governance:

The pu'uhonua is also a statement to the settler state about our authority as Kānaka. The Royal Order of Kamehameha declared that if anyone were being threatened by the settler state they could seek refuge in the pu'uhonua and they would be protected. The pu'uhonua is also significant because it is not just a temporary action; it will continue to exist under Kānaka authority for as long as the people of that place deem it necessary. So, it has the potential to continue for generations. I also think the Pu'uhonua o Pu'uhuluhulu presents a powerful, living example of a self-organized, noncapitalist community that is based on Indigenous Hawaiian values, is led by Kānaka Maoli, and includes everyone who abides by the Kapu Aloha. It is an emergent alternative to settler-colonial ways of governing, of providing for peoples' needs, and of living in relation to the land. In my opinion, the blockades have only been successful because of the pu'uhonua.

Davis (2023, 1404) succinctly summarises how in the case of the Mauna Kea protest *pu'uhonua* functions as both a specific (infrapolitical) form of organising during the standoff with state authorities and a broader expression of exilic space beyond colonial control:

⁷ We suggest that it is necessary to shift our attention from institutional state politics to the diverse attempts at sustaining land and lifeways, which can be found in the “immense political terrain ... between quiescence and revolt” (Scott 1990, 200).

[D]esignating the site as a pu'uhonua is an expression of sovereignty on the part of the kia'i. It denotes that they, as opposed to the state, have the authority to create this special designation and to therefore dictate the social practices which occur at the site. At the pu'uhonua kia'i enacted cultural protocols several times a day. The protectors and visitors also participated in pule, mele, and hula (prayers, chants, and traditional dances) that centred on cultural practices meant to link participants to the landscape and spiritual power (mana) of the pu'uhonua and the adjacent Maunakea. The protectors also set up a free school at the site – Pu'uhonua o Pu'uhuluhulu University – dedicated to Hawaiian educational perspectives on political sovereignty, land management, and cultural knowledges.

To conclude, this brief exploration of the *pu'uhonua* underlines the creative tension between past and future in performances of Native Hawaiian indigeneity – mapping practices and places where “defiant indigeneity” is both preserved and (re)invented (Teves 2019). Moreover, it reveals how core values like *aloha*, *laulima* and *mālama* are embodied within broader political, cultural and historical contexts where they continue to thrive and foster the decolonial struggle and the resurgence of a Hawaiian world.

CONCLUSION

What we aimed to articulate in this article was a profound shift in our political vision that is challenging the legacy of colonialism and the self-destructive ideologies which have shaped much of modern history. The crises we face – ranging from environmental degradation to political instability and the erosion of human dignity – demand radically new political, social and economic models. Simply put, they call for new ways of relating to each other, and new places of refuge that – which is becoming ever more obvious – are unable to emerge by merely tinkering with the existing structures. They require a radical redefinition of our core values, prompting a rethinking of the very principles guiding our social, economic and political systems. The challenge is clear: we must reconceptualise the relationships between life and work, production and consumption, as well as the individual and the collective.

We intervened in these discussions by exploring care/*mālama* as foundational principles for the necessary paradigm shift. We examined the resurgence of Kanaka Maoli, or the Native Hawaiian world, considering its relevance and the transformative potential beyond its immediate context. Engaging with the politics of care across diverse modalities and contexts, we followed Goodyear-Ka'ōpua and Kuper's (2024) argument that at a time of global climate crisis dialogue ought to be practised as a form of reciprocal obligation. We stressed the importance of interpreting and connecting distinct yet interrelated concepts and struggles in order to foster deeper understanding of our shared challenges and collective possibilities. In addition, we considered how the concept and practice

of care require the emergence of new political forms that simultaneously exist both beyond and beneath traditional state structures.

We argue that caring politics is not a retreat or surrender but a strategic and compassionate response to a world that is deeply fractured in which existing structures seem inadequate or are even becoming harmful. In the face of environmental collapse, political instability and escalating inequality, caring politics offers a new framework for prefigurative politics. It provides a way to cope, adapt and endure in the short term, while maintaining the possibility of long-term, transformative change. It is a form of politics that seeks to provide immediate relief, protection and care to those who are suffering, even as we continue to address the deeper structural causes of our global crises. In the meantime, caring politics allows us to build places of refuge where care, empathy and solidarity can flourish or be at least preserved. The point we are making here is simple and clear: caring or what Grove (2023) might call palliative politics does not offer bug-out bags for post-apocalyptic times, nor false hope, but provides a way to collectively face uncertainty and cultivate caring politics while we work toward transformative change.

We argue that caring politics is neither a retreat nor a form of surrender, but rather a strategic and compassionate response to a deeply fractured world – one in which existing structures often appear inadequate or are even becoming harmful. In the face of environmental collapse, political instability, and escalating inequality, caring politics offers a new framework for prefigurative politics. It provides a means to cope, adapt, and endure in the short term, while sustaining the possibility of long-term, transformative change. This is a form of politics that seeks to deliver immediate relief, protection, and care to those who are suffering, even as it remains committed to addressing the deeper structural causes of global crises. In the meantime, caring politics enables the creation of spaces of refuge, where care, empathy, and solidarity can flourish, or at the very least be preserved. The point we are making here is simple and clear: caring or what Grove (2023) might call *palliative politics* does not offer bug-out bags for post-apocalyptic times, nor false promises of salvation. Rather, it provides a way to collectively confront uncertainty and cultivate caring relations while working toward transformative change. In this sense, it indeed offers us the *pū'olo* of hope.

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PŪ‘OLO UPANJA: POLITIKA SKRBI OD OBAL HAVAJEV DO ULIC EVROPE

Povzetek. Srečevanje z večplastnimi krizami – od vse večje ekonomske neenakosti in slabšanja zdravja do podnebne zloma in porasta avtoritarnih režimov – razkriva nujnost vnovičnega premisleka o naših družbenih, političnih in ekonomskih modelih. Prevladujoči okviri, na katere se še vedno zanašamo – koncepti, ideali, merila, institucije in prakse –, namreč niso le nezadostni, temveč tudi neprimerni za spopad z izzivi pred nami. Da bi odgovoril nanje, avtor obravnava skrb/mālama kot temeljno načelo nujnega paradigmatkega obrata. Proučuje revitalizacijo Kanaka Maoli oziroma havajskega sveta ter utemlji njegovo relevantnost in transformativni potencial onkraj njegovega neposrednega konteksta. Članek poudari tudi nujnost interpretacije in povezovanja različnih, a medsebojno povezanih konceptov in bojev, s čimer pripomore h globljemu razumevanju naših skupnih izzivov in kolektivnih možnosti.

Ključni pojmi: Havaji, Kānaka Maoli, politika, skrb, mālama, ne-državni prostori, pū‘uhonua.