

Indriyanto, Kristiawan; Adi, Ida Rochani; Adhitya, Galant Nanta

Disability and indigeneity in Moloka'i : challenging colonial paradigm of leprosy

Brno studies in English. 2024, vol. 50, iss. 1, pp. 185-200

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2024-1-11>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.81082>

License: [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International](#)

Access Date: 18. 01. 2025

Version: 20250107

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

DISABILITY AND INDIGENEITY IN MOLOKA’I: CHALLENGING COLONIAL PARADIGM OF LEPROSY

Brno Studies in English
Volume 50, No. 1, 2024

ISSN 0524-6881 | e-ISSN 1805-0867
<https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2024-1-11>

KRISTIAWAN INDRIYANTO, IDA ROCHANI ADI AND GALANT
NANTA ADHITYA

Abstract

This study contextualizes the colonial conceptions of disease and disability in the context of Native Hawaiians, focusing on Alan Brennert’s *Moloka’i*. The narrative investigates the interwoven nature of disability and indigeneity to challenge the colonial characterization of leprosy. Western colonial authority constructs a racialized image of lepers through various apparatuses, defining the Other as a subject for scientific curiosity and experimentation. *Moloka’i* delineates *Kānaka* resilience against Western stigmatization and marginalization by decolonizing the dominant colonial paradigms. Three interconnected themes—kinship, place, and knowledge-making—articulate the connections between Native Hawaiians, *‘āina* (the land), and their ancestors. Contrary to the Western conception of a natural prison, the island of Moloka’i is positioned as a focal point for Indigenous revival and cultural resurgence. Traditional beliefs, kinship structures, and connections to the land actively shape the experience and understanding of disability in *Kānaka* epistemology. Reading on *Moloka’i* highlights Indigenous resilience against colonial impositions based upon the intersection between disability and indigeneity.

Key words

Colonial discourse; disability studies; indigeneity; Native Hawaiian; the Other

1. Introduction

The portrayal of disease is a recurring theme in literature, exploring its impact on individuals and society. Writers frequently employ disease as a facet to contextualize the multifaceted experiences of individuals affected by various ailments. The authors examine how individuals manage multiple ailments and their profound impact on physical well-being and societal intricacies. (Christ et al. 2006). These diseases often become a source of stigma, fear, and discrimination, reflecting societal attitudes and responses. Leprosy has served as a powerful literary symbol, exploring themes of societal exclusion, fear of the unknown, and resilience in those affected (Indriyanto 2022). The portrayal of leprosy in literature delineates its historical and cultural significance in articulating human experiences and societal responses.

Leprosy has a long history in Western culture, appearing in literature and art dating back to references in the Old Testament and ancient Greek writings. In both the Old and New Testaments, the Bible contains numerous accounts of miraculous healing attributed to old prophets, Christ, and His Apostles (Gron 2007). As Davies et al. identifies, the Bible uses the term “*sara’ath*,” which was translated into Greek as *lepra*, a general term for skin diseases that differs from the modern understanding of Hansen’s disease, commonly known as leprosy today (1990: 127–28). In medieval and Early Modern English literature, leprosy is seen as an indication of sin in the lepers and a sign of corruption and evil (Houston 2016: 30). Authors with leprosy reveal their personal and social struggles. The genre gained recognition by the mid-1930s, offering firsthand experiences and insights into leprosy’s societal impact. Studies of leprosy literature in Japan have focused on its depiction of human rights violations, struggles with illness, and the difficulty of life in quarantine (Tanaka 2013: 99).

Representation of leprosy remains a recurring theme in contemporary literature. For example, Verghese’s *The Covenant of Water* (2023), a narrative spanning three generations in Parambil, Kerala, India, focuses on drowning deaths linked to a local leprosarium (Alpert 2023). Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s 1997 novel *Blu’s Hanging* explores leprosy’s personal and familial dimensions and reveals institutionalization’s impact on disabilities (Russell 2006:66). These depictions highlight how leprosy, along with resulting disabilities, parallels other forms of disempowerment experienced by marginalized postcolonial subjects. As Barker posits,

“disabled people are left, as is often the case with other postcolonial subjects, to mull over the degree to which their social relations are mediated by constructed beliefs about variant bodies and minds (Barker 2014: 3).”

In this context, disability is an additional layer of social identity shaped by prevailing beliefs and biases. It underscores the complex interplay between individual experiences and societal perceptions, which construes the dichotomy of healthy/diseased bodies. Yet, many authors avoid reducing disability to metaphorical devices, giving characters afflicted by leprosy and disability active roles and agency, as seen in Alan Brennert’s *Moloka’i* (2004).

Alan Brennert, a New Jersey novelist, screenwriter, and playwright, moved to California in 1973. Despite being an outsider, he has penned several novels set in Hawaii. One of his notable works, *Moloka’i*, achieved national bestseller status and was chosen as a One Book, One San Diego selection in 2012. The narrative follows Rachel, a Native Hawaiian girl diagnosed with leprosy, the ‘separating sickness’¹ when she was six years old, forced to leave her family and live in the leper colony on Moloka’i. *Moloka’i* chronicles Rachel’s life, from the introduction of sulfones to the near-closure of Kalaupapa, and explores her challenges, including her quest to find her abandoned *keiki* (child). Brennert’s book incorporates significant moments from Hawaii’s history and leprosy based on his research in Hawaii (“An Interview with Alan Brennert,” 2019). His narrative includes the portrayal of Father Damien, a devoted Catholic priest who dedicated his life to missionary work among the Hawaiian lepers of Moloka’i (Norton 2007: 173).

Brenner's *Moloka'i* unfolds against the backdrop of late 19th-century Hawai'i, a period marked by the introduction of modernity and its profound impact on the archipelago. The arrival of white settlers (*haole*²), starting with James Cook's expedition in 1778, brought irreversible changes to Hawai'i's natural, social, and political landscape. Western influences, including assimilation politics, military occupation, disease, capitalist growth, and the illegal annexation of Hawaii in 1898, nearly extinguished Native Hawaiian culture and population (Haley 2016; Trask 1993). One specific disease that had a notable presence in Hawaii, dating back to at least 1830, was leprosy. The physical disabilities from the disease and the belief in its contagious nature, compounded by biblical references, fueled the stigmatization of lepers in Hawai'i.

Several other epidemics had decimated Hawaii's native population. But Westerners reacted to leprosy differently than they did to other diseases. The racial nature of the Hawaiian leprosy policy is most evident when it is compared to the policy of Norway during the same period. Norwegians with leprosy were not arrested, detained, or exiled. They were treated in local and regional hospitals, never far from family members. When quarantine was needed, it was provided without criminalization or imprisonment (Amundson and Ruddle-Miyamoto 2010: 19).

Leprosy, known as *Mai Pake* or Chinese sickness in Hawaii, is believed to have been introduced by Chinese laborers who immigrated to the islands to work on sugar plantations. It quickly spread to other island chains from O'ahu, the most heavily settled Hawaiian island. In response to this epidemic, the Legislative Assembly of the Hawaiian Islands passed An Act to Prevent the Spread of Leprosy" in 1866, signed by King Kamehameha V (Crosby 1992: 191–192). During the latter half of the 19th century, as concerns about health and disease grew in Hawaii, some Westerners, including Reverend S.E. Bishop, attributed the outbreak of leprosy to the traditional Hawaiian lifestyle. They accused Hawaiians of engaging in unchastity, drunkenness, sorcery, and idolatry (Herman 2001:26). This Orientalist bias and racially-based discourse primarily targeted Native Hawaiians as the 'Other,' as Said (1997: 5) articulated in contrast to the healthy American settlers. As the American influence in Hawaii grew, the restrictions on lepers and the stringency of policies applied against afflicted individuals grew correspondingly (Kern 2010: 78). The policy culminated in establishment of a leper sanatorium on Moloka'i island, known as Kalawao. From 1865 until its eventual termination in 1969, Native Hawaiians diagnosed with leprosy were legally exiled to this state-regulated leper colony.³

The leper colony in Moloka'i, Hawaii, is a historically significant site for treating individuals affected by Hansen's Disease (leprosy), featuring two settlements of Kalawao and Kalaupapa. Initially established for patient treatment, Kalawao imposed heavy self-sufficiency expectations on patients, which many found challenging due to their illness or demoralization (Strange 2004: 88–89). It was an unconventional prison without walls, cells, or turnkeys. With minimal medical aid from the Kingdom and later the territorial government, Protestant and Catholic clerics and *kokuas* (helpers) were the primary caregivers for a predominantly native population. In 1949, leprosy in Hawai'i was officially designated as Hansen's

disease rather than leprosy, yet the stigma and public fear persisted (Inglis 2013: 218). It was not until 1969 that isolation policies and segregation laws were discontinued. Despite the presence of medical facilities and personnel at Kalaupapa, most who were forcibly sent there recall it as a place where people were sent to die. The discourse regarding leprosy and exile to Moloka'i often treats its exiled patients as legally deceased, as illustrated in the following passage.

Over the intervening century, approximately ten thousand people were banished to Molokai, where they served indeterminate sentences with little hope for release or cure. Although patients could be "paroled" (the official term for medically monitored release) if they presented no bacteriological symptoms, former exiles typically assumed that they had been sentenced to death (Strange 2004: 90).

The historical narrative of the Kalaupapa leper colony is vividly portrayed in Brenner's *Moloka'i*, spanning several decades as it chronicles Rachel's early exile to Molokai and her eventual release after fifty years. Moloka'i follows seven-year-old Rachel, torn from her family and life in Honolulu due to a leprosy diagnosis. The story details her quarantine and life in Kalaupapa, highlighting the experiences of the afflicted and their caregivers, the pain of isolation, and the unique freedom within the community. During her time in Moloka'i, Rachel embraces the wisdom of her ancestors and the pre-Christian religion they practiced.

This study examines how leprosy is portrayed to construct and subvert colonial discourse on disease and disability. It conceptualizes narratives emanating from disabled bodies as a means to address issues such as damage, trauma, inequality, and the abuse of power in a postcolonial context. This study employs disability and postcolonial theories to show how Moloka'i challenges colonial views of leprosy and offers resistance from Native Hawaiian perspectives. It critiques the literary representation of leprosy, which constructs lepers from colonial lenses, and its political implications in Hawaii. The following section reviews the intersection of disability studies and postcolonial theory as the framework for this research.

2. Locating Disability Studies and Postcolonialism

Disability studies is an interdisciplinary academic field that critically examines the meaning, nature, and societal consequences of disability. This field challenges the perception of disability as merely an objective state of impairment, emphasizing its character as a social construct (Watson and Hiles 2022: 2). Scholars study how society treats people with unique physical traits as the Other, questioning how politics and social norms shape these interactions. Disability studies examine historical aspects, noting that while bodily differences have marked individuals for centuries, disability studies as an academic discipline are recent (Johnstone 2001: 5). The interdisciplinary emergence of disability studies explores the complexity of disability, challenging various discourses and institutional practices. It underscores a paradigm shift, portraying disability not as a personal predicament but as a social pathology rooted in stigma and prejudice. As Gabriel-Thomson posits,

Disability is best understood as a sign system that, by differentiating and marking bodies and minds, produced dis/abled bodies and maintained the ideal of the inherently stable, non-disabled body or mind (2002: 2)

Disability studies critically examine the power dynamics inherent in societal notions of ‘idealized’ and ‘deformed’ bodies, unraveling the complex processes of othering and normalization. This exploration highlights how societal norms shape disability experiences, challenge biases, and promote inclusivity in understanding human diversity. Goodley underlines how the term disability implies a lack in fiscal, physical, mental, or legal aspects, invoking a marginalized status across society, culture, economics, and politics (2011: 14–15). Stigmatization, as a process, tends to be associated with the victimization of individuals or groups marked as different or deviant from the established societal norms. This victimization perpetuates a cycle of exclusion, creating barriers that extend beyond physical limitations to encompass social, economic, and political realms. Moreover, the association of stigma with socially inferior attributes reinforces a static view of society, suggesting that certain groups are inherently lesser/abnormal. In line with this conceptual structure, disability studies challenge the normative assumptions on the constructed nature of societal ideals and the power dynamics that maintain them (Ferguson and Nusbaum 2012).

The intersection of disability studies with narrative and literature provides an avenue to examine the pervasive representation of disability in various literary forms. As previously recounted, disability is a recurring theme in literature, appearing in various forms from early European poetry to contemporary global novels. (Barker and Murray 2017; Jarman 2017; Smith and Sparkes 2008). The need to unravel the complexities of disability metaphors and address biases in their representation led to the emergence of literary disability studies as a critical discipline in the 1990s. Seminal texts like Lennard J. Davis’s *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995) and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) played a pivotal role in shaping this new academic domain. Their work shows that societal judgments frame disability negatively based on the prevailing concept of normalcy (Barker and Murray 2017: 3). Given the dominance of the Western model, recent developments emphasize moving away from Western-centric disability theorizing.

In *Disability Studies Readers* (2015), Barker and Murray advocate for a more situated understanding of disability rooted in non-Western perspectives. They argue that Disability Studies often transfer theories and methods developed in Western academia to global contexts with limited consideration for local formations and interpretations of disability (2015: 61). In their view, the intersection between disability studies and postcolonialism should acknowledge the limitations of Western-centric models in analyzing disability. It challenges the universal approach embedded in the social model of disability, urging a critical examination of its naturalization. Synder and Mitchell (2006) posit how disability should be positioned within a global or postcolonial framework, employing identity politics language reminiscent of the prevalent style in much postcolonial literature.

Analyzing disability in a postcolonial framework should emphasize the material dimensions of disability and impairment. It also highlights rhetorical connections commonly made between postcolonial elements like exile, diaspora, apartheid, slavery, and experiences of disability (Sherry 2007: 10). A postcolonial disability study should avoid oversimplifying these connections as metaphors for each other's experiences. One example, as stated by Tuck and Wayne, decolonization must be understood as a concrete process, not merely a metaphor used to ease settler guilt and complicity (2012: 29). Postcolonialism should not be metaphorically equated with the disability experience, nor should terms like colonialism or disability be rhetorically used as symbols of oppression in unrelated contexts. As Sherry identifies, colonialism in Africa is often referred to as national disablement; the colonized are viewed as disabled, and colonial culture is seen as a manifestation of impaired intellects (2007: 14).

Representation of disability in postcolonial literature critiques power dynamics and provides a valuable methodology for analyzing marginalized subject positions. Postcolonial writings reflect a colonial past and conjure a novel way of creating and understanding the world. This approach is particularly attuned to the culturally specific identity constructions within non-Western contexts. It explores how representations relate to North American and European disability theory (autonomy, normalcy, and minority identity), which was reimagined to analyze the historical and culturally specific meaning of disability (Krentz 2020: 5–6). Disability in literature serves narrative and aesthetic functions beyond colonial injury or trauma, offering tropes for exploring themes like loss, suffering, and dispossession. To concur, examining postcolonial literature through disability studies requires a critical analysis of its narrative roles and political implications (Barker 2017: 106).

3. Colonial Conceptions of Disease and Disability in *Moloka'i*

Brennert's *Moloka'i* contextualizes how Western colonial power shapes societal views of idealized and deformed/diseased bodies, involving processes of othering and normalization through various apparatuses. The narrative contextualizes the stigmatization of afflicted Hawaiians and how the colonial labeling of diseased bodies is constructed to persecute and isolate lepers, subjecting them to various scientific experiments. It provides a detailed description of the condition in the Kalaupapa leper colony and the lack of attention given by the U.S. government. Different from another representation of leprosy in Kalaupapa, such as O.A Bushnell's novel of the same name, *Moloka'i*, which presents a polyvocal narration of native/settler perspectives (Indriyanto and Darmawan 2023: 65), Brennert contextualizes a singular, third-person perspective of Rachel. Despite leaving Kalaupapa in the 1950s, Rachel remains persecuted by those clinging to outdated notions of leprosy as a transmissible disease. This temporal perspective allows readers to observe the shifting paradigms and perspectives surrounding leprosy over time.

The Other is often depicted as a deficiency, erasing the unique qualities of individuals and reinforcing a cultural norm that idealizes an autonomous and

able-bodied subject as the standard representation of humanity. This dehumanizing perspective perpetuates a cultural hegemony that strives to posit an independent, rational, and competent able-bodied subject as representative of a normal existence (Ghai 2012: 274). Colonial authority constructs the idealized image of lepers that could be controlled and contained within an isolated penal colony in Moloka'i. The Western inclination, through the apparatus of the Board of Health, tended to associate *Kānaka* with leprosy, particularly among those classified as Hawaiians or part-Hawaiians (Day 2017: 113). Leprosy threatened normalcy through the entangled nature of colonial activity, Western theories of contagion, and microbial science with Christian morality.

Moloka'i contextualizes various mechanisms colonial authorities employ to construct an idealized image of the lepers. The legal apparatus was enforced through An Act to Prevent the Spread of Leprosy, which set apart land to isolate people who were believed capable of spreading the disease. It was passed by the Legislative Assembly and approved by King Kamehameha V in 1865. Although Hawai'i was still a sovereign kingdom, enacting this policy was linked with American influence in the government. Herman contends that leprosy's introduction into this narrative was a standalone event and the concluding chapter in a century-long saga. Policies proposed by Western advisers, ostensibly designed to safeguard the Hawaiians, contributed to the kingdom's decline and eventual annexation into the United States (2001:268). The novel represents this paradigm: "The foreigners in His Majesty's government convinced Kamehameha V that unless something was done, the scourge would be the death of the Hawaiian race" (Brennert 2004: 40). Diseases like smallpox and tuberculosis devastated the Native Hawaiian population, decreasing it from about 300,000 to 57,000 by the 1860s. The discourse on the leper epidemic was used strategically to segregate the *Kānaka*.

The discourse surrounding lepers in Hawai'i was further constructed through the strategic use of religions and Western notions of morality. This notion frames the introduction of diseases by foreigners not merely as a health concern but as a narrative that portrays Hawaiians as inherently spiritually and physically deficient. As defined by Ashcroft, Griffin, and Tiffin, the enforcement of colonial discourse refers to the "complex of signs and practices that organize social existence and social reproduction" (2013: 50). An excerpt from the novel depicts a sermon by Reverend Waiamau, who is described as a full-blooded Hawaiian. His address contextualizes how the Hawaiians themselves internalize the discourse concerning leprosy:

There are those, indeed, who say leprosy is more than a physical ailment; it is a moral disease as well. Some medical men—including the former physician for the Moloka'i Leprosarium, Dr. George Fitch—believe that leprosy is a fourth stage of venereal disease. The syphilitic becomes, in time, the leper. Could this be the true source of leprosy? Not bad hygiene, not leprous touch or breath. Unchastity. Immorality (Brennert 2004: 39).

When infectious diseases are linked to immorality, it reinforces the rationale for social exclusion. Consequently, the illness or the confinement of those affected

can be exploited to sustain specific cultural norms or authority structures, with the marginalized becoming the primary targets. At first, the stigma concerning leprosy was targeted toward the Chinese indentured laborers with the name *ma`i Pāke*/Chinese sickness. This association is supported by including Chinese individuals among those with the disease and the heightened familiarity of Chinese immigrants due to its endemic nature in their homeland (Inglis 2013: 34). Growing American influence in Hawaii strategically employed leprosy discourse to target the *Kānaka*, positioning native peoples as immortal and unclean, placing them outside of civilization. This discourse proved remarkably potent, persisting even in the late 1950s when patients with Hansen's Disease were no longer mandated to be secluded. Rachel, after sixty years of exile, still faces persecution in Honolulu due to her enduring unclean status.

She would soon discover that this landlord was more polite than most. The next, a woman renting out a one-bedroom apartment on King Street didn't even bother to make excuses. "What the hell are you doing here? You unclean, don't belong in a city with clean people!" (Brennert 2004: 320).

In the context of colonial authority, the diseased body becomes a paradoxical construction, simultaneously portrayed as repulsive and yet serving as a captivating locus for experimentation and fascination. As proposed by Plumwood, the portrayal of non-humans as the Other is shaped by reductionist terms derived from mind/body binarism, conjuring images of bestial and savage non-Western people (2003: 53). The lepers were perceived as lacking intrinsic value, confined solely by their designation as lepers, characterized by monstrous appearance. This distorted image of the lepers emerges through the portrayal of the Kalihi receiving station in Honolulu, a temporary location before their eventual exile to Kalaupapa: "Most appeared normal, a few merely tattooed with florid spots on faces or arms, but some ... some of the faces were pocked with ugly sores, some were as bulbous and knobby as a coral bed, while others were mercifully bandaged like mummies" (Brennert 2004: 45). Concurrently, the Otherness of the lepers is a locus of scientific curiosity and experimentation. From Rachel's perspective, upon arriving at the Kalihi medical facility, she was not seen as "a six-year-old girl but as a teeming culture of bacillus laprae in the shape of a six-year-old girl" (Brennert 2004: 45). This prevailing paradigm persists within the leper colony in Moloka'i with the establishment of the United States Leprosy Investigation Station (USLIS) in 1909. While USLIS features extensive facilities, the treatments provided are cold and detached, making patients feel confined within its grounds (Bushwell 1968: 88). The lepers' bodies were instrumentalized and systematically analyzed for a possible cure for leprosy.

Plumbing new depths of mortification, an assistant then opened the window shutters, bright sunlight streaming over Rachel's naked body, and used a camera to document each leprosy symptom on Rachel's body photographically. Later, she compared notes with the other patients, who were as offended by their examinations as she was. "Just like bloody Kalihi," one man summed it nicely (Brennert 2004: 204).

The analysis explores how Brennert's *Moloka'i* articulates the construction of Western colonial conception centered around the dichotomy between idealized

and deformed/diseased bodies. The dominant normativity racializes disability, making it a distinctive factor and the primary reference point for deviations. This rationalization legitimizes the act of exiling lepers into Moloka'i through various apparatuses the authorities employ to construe an idealized image of lepers as the Other. The diseased body becomes a paradoxical construction – simultaneously portrayed as repulsive and yet as a captivating locus for experimentation and fascination. In the subsequent part, the present study emphasizes how *Moloka'i* challenges the colonial constructions of the lepers and articulates areas of resistance based on the Native Hawaiians' differing conceptions of disease. It further posits the leper colony as a site of empowerment and rediscovery of Indigenous epistemology founded upon the holistic understanding of the world.

4. Intersections of Indigeneity and Disability in Moloka'i

Brennert's *Moloka'i* empowers marginalized subject positions by critically examining and challenging the artificial construction embedded in the colonial label of leprosy. The narrative conjures the act of resistance through the agency of Native Hawaiians, grounded in their distinct conception of disease and disability. Within the broader context of postcolonial writings, the novel serves as a lens to reflect on the colonial past while presenting a novel framework for creating and understanding the world. Conceptualizations of disability and body/mind differences take vastly different forms when considered outside narrow settler and imperial frames. The isolation and exile of the lepers in this narrative are employed as an avenue to rediscover familial kinship and revitalize Hawaiian identity.

Moloka'i island, the site of the leper colony in Kalawao and Kalaupapa, has become a site of contestation between Hawaii and the West. Historically, Moloka'i was long inhabited by self-sufficient taro growers and fishermen, from which Polynesian settlers migrated around 450-650 AD. Kamehameha I conquered Moloka'i in 1795. The result of his conquest left Molokai desolated, and an epidemic in 1803 caused the island's population to decrease further. Moreover, Molokai's residents also migrated to nearby Honolulu and Lahaina to participate in the whaling and trading economy. As a result, in the early 1800s, Molokai gained the reputation of being the Lonely Isle. It was deemed *terra nullius* – a space suitable for Western colonial utilization (Adams 2003: 20). The colonial conception further designates this depopulated island as a 'natural prison' for all people diagnosed with leprosy. With towering mountains on each side of the peninsula, it was impossible to access or escape Kalaupapa via any transportation but boat or, later, by air (Harris and Matusitz 2016: 303). However, Molokai's cultural heritage challenges this Western-imposed identity. Traditionally, the island was renowned for its spiritual power, hosting revered *kāhuna*⁴ and being the birthplace of *hula*.⁵ As the narrative progresses, this island becomes a powerful locus of Indigenous revitalization grounded in Moloka'i's historical and cultural significance.

Brennert problematizes the contrasting perspectives on Moloka'i through an event that unfolds during the voyage to the leper colony on the Mokoli'i steamer. Within this shared spatial setting, passengers grapple with the harsh reality

of their isolation, and two distinct viewpoints emerge. The initial perspective aligns with the colonial portrayal of Moloka'i as a natural prison, emphasizing its formidable landscapes that render escape futile. This spatial representation is articulated as follows:

The huddled exiles gazed up, taking in the powering *pali* that rose so impossibly high above the peninsula: a sheer vertical cliff, green and densely wooded, reaching two thousand feet into the sky. Waterfall spilled like tears down its face. The high sea walls tapered into the distance on both sides of the peninsula, extending the prison wall for nearly the entire length of North Moloka'i, precluding any hope of escape. The exiles gave up a collective sigh as they sailed into the shadow of the *pali*, standing like a judgment before them. Immense and final. *Auwe! Auwe!* (Brennert 2004: 65).

The prior passage contextualizes a vivid depiction of the horrors the exiled lepers will face in Moloka'i. The waterfall is metaphorically seen as shedding tears, the peninsula's cliff likened to a prison wall, while the pale shadow symbolically conveys societal judgment on the afflicted. This vivid imagery reflects a Western perspective that casts the penal colony as a forbidding and monstrous realm, equating exile to Moloka'i with a virtual death sentence (Silva 2005: 89–90). In contrast, Rachel exemplifies the Native Hawaiian perspective, which critiques the colonial paradigm:

Rachel saw the lush green *pali* soaring high into the sky—more significant than anything she had ever seen, more beautiful than anything she could have imagined. Much later, she would learn the word for it: grandeur. There was a grandeur to the *pali* that awed and moved her, and for the first time in days, she felt something other than terror and loneliness (Brennert 2004: 69).

In her spatial understanding, the focus shifts from the ominous imagery to the landscape's natural beauty. Rachel's perspective contrasts sharply with the horror and isolation depicted earlier, instead forging an emotional connection with the place founded on admiration for its picturesque landscape. She was captivated by the grandeur of the *pali*, which was more beautiful than what she had seen in Honolulu. This reinterpretation transforms Moloka'i from the conception of a lonely prison as prefigured by Western discourse into a place intricately woven with tradition and spirituality.

In Brennert's narrative, the interplay of indigeneity and disability unfolds through three interconnected themes – kinship, place, and knowledge-making – forming the core elements that shape and define the characters' experience. Kinship has long been a target of imperial and colonial medical and legal intervention enforcing racially based segregation and separation. The Native Hawaiian response to leprosy and the exile law is intricately tied to the Hawaiian cosmology of their ancestry. Handy and Pukui emphasize the Hawaiians' ancestral connection between people, land, and gods through '*ohana* (relatives by blood, marriage,

and adoption) and their attachment to a specific locality termed *'āina* (the land) (1972: 2). Separation from one's *'ohana* meant facing challenges alone and losing connections to both the land and gods, as traditional Hawaiians valued personal identity rooted in genealogy, *'ohana* (extended family), and *āina* (local geographical home). Being exiled to Moloka'i meant severing these connections altogether.

Moloka'i foregrounds how *Kānaka* conception of kinship extends toward other-than-human beings and to air, water, and land. This echoes the belief in *'aumakua*, ancestral spirits revered in the forms of animals, plants, rocks, and clouds (Pukui and Elbert 1986:32). *'Aumakua* is perceived to exist in both the spiritual and tangible realms, an integral aspect preserved in the sacred island of Moloka'i. Exile in Kalaupapa becomes a transformative journey for the *Kānaka*, reconnecting them with ancestral beliefs, as seen through Rachel's perspective. She grasps the holistic nature of the *Kānaka* worldview, recognizing her deceased ancestors in the physical world as sharks, owls, fishes, or lizards (Brennert 2004: 121). Similarly, the land, *'āina*, a term denoting land in Hawaiian, holds a deeper significance, signifying "that from which one eats." Hawaiian traditions emphasize that the gods (*'Akua*) created the *'āina*, rendering it inherently divine as "having been born of the *akua*, the *'āina* is itself an *akua*" (Kame'elehiwa 1992: 8)." The profound reverence of Native Hawaiians toward *'āina* as a family member is vividly expressed in the following quote from Haleola, a *kahuna*'s perspective. "I believe in the *'āina*—the land and the sea and the air around us. When our ancestors first saw the fury of the surf or the angry fire spitting from volcanoes, they saw a power to these things they could not explain. They knew they had *mana*—power (Brennert 2004: 176)."

The narration further underlines how the island of Moloka'i functions as a locus of knowledge-making, safeguarding and perpetuating traditional epistemology and cultural traditions. Themes of respect, love, and the sanctity of nature are intricately woven into the fabric of Hawaiian tradition, a central tenet in Brennert's narration. The novel portrays the continuity of oral traditions such as *hula* dances, *mele hula* (songs), and *mo'olelo* (stories), preserving them for future generations despite being exiled. The continuation of the *hula* dance is prominently featured in the narration. Among the Hawaiian pantheists, reverence for *Laka* as the patron goddess of *Hula* is expressed through a prayer of worship and an altar inside the hall adorned with sure leaves and flowers. Despite Western authorities labeling these practices as pagan and immoral during the relocation, individuals afflicted with leprosy continued to perform *hula* as an homage to *Laka*. It is narrated in the novel how "in exile, these people danced to *Laka*, turned their damaged faces to her, as two-fingered musicians magically coaxed rhythm from homemade drums (Brennert 2004: 73). Disability and disfigurement do not hinder the exiled lepers from expressing their reverence to the deities through *hula*. *Hula* performances serve both as entertainment and as sacred rituals, as Emerson encapsulates:

the hula was a religious service, in which poetry, music, pantomime, and the dance lent themselves, under dramatic art, to refresh men's minds. Its view of life was idyllic, and it gave itself to the celebration of those mythical

times when gods and goddesses moved on the earth as men and women and when men and women were as gods (1906: 5).

Rachel's interactions with Haleola symbolize the passing down of ancestral traditions, including stories about Hawaiian deities and the creation of Maui Island. As a *kahuna*, Haleola preserves the oral tradition and heritage through storytelling. Haleola teaches her how "from time to time, a god would assume human form and live among us here on earth" (Brennert 2004:92). This teaching affirms Hawaiian cosmology, which rejects the demarcation between the physical and the supernatural. Other inherited knowledge includes *heiau* (place of worship), burial customs following Hawaiian traditions, and accompanying songs. In line with tradition, Haleola's husband, Keo, was buried traditionally, wrapped in layers of *kapa* cloth, with an accompanying chant, "*Haku, Ano, 'eia mai kou mamo, Keohi.*" (Haku, Ano, here is your descendant, Keohi (Brennert 2004:76).") Eventually, Haleola and Rachel were laid to rest following Hawaiian traditions, returning to the *'āina*.

The concluding scene of Rachel's burial in the 1970s holds symbolic significance, representing the enduring resilience of native Hawaiian culture in Moloka'i after the period of exile. Today, Kalaupapa National Historical Park stands on the former Kalaupapa Leper settlement, dedicated to preserving the historical legacy of Moloka'i's leper colonies. Despite the 1865 quarantine law's repeal and the closure of the leper colony, many former inhabitants still live on Moloka'i, maintaining their ancestral way of life. Recently, this island earned the moniker Last Hawaiian Island due to its 72% Hawaiian population, absence of urban development (no stoplights or structures taller than a coconut tree), and sustained subsistence practices (Gupta 2014: 391). It can be stated how Moloka'i island holds cultural and religious significance due to its role in preserving authentic Hawaiian traditions. Moloka'i reclaims its significance as the colonial stigma of the lonely isle and leper colony fades as a site of Indigenous empowerment and resilience.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Brennert's *Moloka'i* correlates the narratives of disability and indigeneity, focusing on the colonial conceptions of disease and disability in the context of Native Hawaiian culture. The novel delineates *Kānaka's* resilience and resistance in the face of Western stigmatization and marginalization. The narrative decolonizes dominant Western paradigms by challenging the artificial construction embedded in the colonial label of leprosy. The themes of kinship, place, and knowledge-making emerge as central elements that shape the characters' experiences, emphasizing the profound connection between Native Hawaiians, *'āina*, and their ancestors. Moloka'i island becomes a contested space, challenging the Western-imposed identity of a natural prison and transforming it into a locus of Indigenous revitalization.

This study connects with broader discussions on disability and indigeneity, exploring the interwoven aspects of disability, identity, and cultural heritage. The analysis shows that societal judgments frame disability negatively based on the prevailing concept of normalcy. Postcolonial critique on *Moloka'i* highlights how colonialism's legacy shapes these judgments and marginalizes non-Western experiences of disability. In the context of disability studies, *Moloka'i* challenges the one-dimensional, often pathologizing view of disability prevalent in Western discourse. The reading contextualizes the agency of the lepers as individuals rooted in their cultural heritage, a conception that denies colonial labeling of disability and disease. The analysis contributes to a growing body of work that emphasizes the importance of cultural context in shaping perceptions of disability. The significance of traditional beliefs, kinship structures, and connections to the land in influencing how disability is experienced and understood within Native Hawaiian communities is emphasized. To concur, *Moloka'i* highlights Indigenous resilience against colonial labeling of disability based upon the intersection between disability and indigeneity.

Notes

- ¹ In Western culture and medicine, the common practice of separating the healthy from the sick left a lasting legacy, especially in the case of leprosy. This practice involved forcibly isolating infected individuals from their homes and relocating them to remote colonies, preventing interaction with the outside world. Notably, Kalaupapa, Hawaii, is a prominent example in the United States, where over 10,000 individuals have been isolated since the colony's establishment in the 1860s (Ingils 2013, 2014).
- ² *Haole* means foreign/foreigner but is often used colloquially to describe foreigners from Europe or mainland America. Locals in Hawai'i often use *haole* pejoratively to describe white or light-skinned nonlocals.
- ³ Although the law mandated that any person found to have leprosy would be isolated, its actual implementation fell most harshly on native Hawaiians. Of the 1,159 patients who lived within the Moloka'i settlement as of 31 March 1890, the superintendent identified 96 percent (1,114) as native Hawaiians. Chinese patients represented the next largest contingent, with about 2.5 percent (28). Europeans and Americans composed a tiny minority of 1 percent (12) (Moran 2007: 58)
- ⁴ *Kahuna* in Hawaiian culture refers to an expert or professional in various fields, encompassing roles such as doctors, surgeons, dentists, priests, sorcerers, magicians, and ministers. Historically, *kahuna* has held significant importance in Hawaiian society, denoting individuals with deep knowledge and expertise. Hawaiian culture recognizes the *kahuna* as a figure of authority and knowledge, playing essential roles in spiritual, healing, and practical domains (Mitchell 1982: 80).
- ⁵ *Hula* dances and the accompanying *mele* (songs) are a form of Hawaiian oral literature that honors the personification of nature through gods and goddesses. *Hula*, a *Kānaka* traditional dance, involves movements that visualize the words of the songs, often telling legends or heroic tales in a religious ritual. *Hula* performances serve two purposes: to honor and worship the deities and to entertain the local community (Imada 2011).

References

- Adams, William M. (2003) Nature and the Colonial Mind. In: *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*, edited by W. M. (William M. Adams and M. Mulligan. London: Earthscan Publications, 16–50.
- Alpert, Joseph S. (2023) Leprosy in Literature and Art: The Covenant of Water. *American Journal of Medicine* 000(000): 1–2. doi: 10.1016/j.amjmed.2023.06.016.
- Amundson, Ron, and Akira Ruddle-Miyamoto (2010) A Wholesome Horror : Stigma of Leprosy in 19th Century Hawai'i. *Disability Studies Quarterly* 3(4): 15–36.
- Anon. (2019) An Interview with Alan Brennert. *Bookbrowse.Com*. Retrieved (https://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/992/alan-brennert).
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (2013) *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. Second Edi. Oxon: Routledge.
- Barker, Clare (2014) Interdisciplinary Dialogues: Disability and Postcolonial Studies. *Review of Disability Studies* 6(3): 1–12.
- Barker, Clare (2017) 'Radiant Affliction': Disability Narratives in Postcolonial Literature. in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, edited by C. Barker and S. Murray. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 104–120.
- Barker, Clare, and Stuart Murray (2015) Disabling Postcolonialism: Global Disability Cultures and Democratic Criticism. In: *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by L. J. Davis. New York: Routledge, 61–73
- Barker, Clare, and Stuart Murray (2017) Introduction: On Reading Disability in Literature. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, edited by C. Barker and S. Murray. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–14.
- Brennert, Alan (2004) *Moloka'i*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Bushwell, O. A. (1968) The United States Leprosy Investigation Station at Kalawao. *The Hawaiian Journal of History* 2(4): 76–94.
- Christ, Carol T., Alfred David, Barbara K. Lewalski, Lawrence Lipking, and George M. Logan (2006) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature Eighth Edition*. 8th ed. New York: W.W Norton & Company, Inc.
- Crosby, Alfred W. (1992) Hawaiian Depopulation as a Model for the Amerindian Experience. In: *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence*, edited by T. Ranger and P. Slark. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 175–202.
- Davies, Lloyd Margaret., and T. A. Lloyd. Davies (1990) Biblical Leprosy - A Comedy of Errors. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 83(2): 127–128.
- Day, Leanne (2017) Empire's Imagination: Race, Settler Colonialism and Indigeneity in 'Local' Hawai'i Literature. University of Washington.
- Emerson, Nathaniel Bright (1906) *Unwritten Literature of Hawaii*. Vol. 8.
- Ferguson, Philip M., and Emily Nusbaum (2012) Disability Studies: What Is It and What Difference Does It Make? *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities* 37(2): 70–80. doi: 10.1177/154079691203700202.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie (2002) Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory. *NWSA* 14(3): 1–32.
- Ghai, Anita (2012) Engaging with Disability with Postcolonial Theory. In: *Postcolonial Theory*, edited by D. Goodley, B. Hughes, and L. Davis. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 270–286.
- Goodley, Dan (2011) *Disability Studies : An Interdisciplinary Introduction*. London: SAGE Publications, Ltd.
- Gron, K. (2007) Leprosy in Literature and Art. *International Journal of Leprosy* 41(2): 249–283. doi: 10.1093/fs/knl214.
- Gupta, Clare (2014) Sustainability, Self-Reliance and Aloha Aina: The Case of Molokai,

- Hawaii. *International Journal of Sustainable Development and World Ecology* 21(5): 389–397. doi: 10.1080/13504509.2014.880163.
- Haley, James L. (2016) *Captive Paradise- A History of Hawaii*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Handy, E. S. Craighill, Elizabeth Green Handy, and Mary Kawena Pukui (1972) *Native Planters in Old Hawaii: Their Life, Lore, and Environment*. Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press.
- Harris, Adrea Pitman, and Jonathan Matusitz (2016) The Exile of Hansen's Disease Patients to Moloka'i: A Diffusion of Innovations Perspective. *Social Work in Public Health* 31(4): 299–308. doi: 10.1080/19371918.2015.1137514.
- Herman, Rdk (2001) Out of Sight, out of Mind, out of Power: Leprosy, Race and Colonization in Hawai'i. *Journal of Historical Geography* 27(3): 319–337. doi: 10.1006/jhge.2001.0325.
- Houston, A. (2016) 'Seiknes Incurabil': The Evolution of Literary Representations of Leprosy in Medieval and Early Modern English Narratives. *Chicago Journal of History* 30–41.
- Imada, Adria L. (2011) Transnational Hula as Colonial Culture. *Journal of Pacific History* 46(2): 149–176. doi: 10.1080/00223344.2011.607260.
- Indriyanto, Kristiawan (2022) Ma' i Lepera: Representation of Leprosy as Ecological Other in Selected Hawai'ian-American Literature. *K@ta : A Biannual Publication on the Study of Language and Literature* 24(1): 1–10. doi: 10.9744/kata.24.1.1-10.
- Indriyanto, Kristiawan, and Ruly Indra Darmawan (2023) Challenging Colonial Construction of Diseased Bodies : Polyvocal Narrative Voices in Bushnell's Moloka'i. *Forum for World Literature Studies* 15(1): 61–80.
- Inglis, Kerri A. (2013) *Ma' i Lepera : A History of Leprosy*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Inglis, Kerri A. (2014) Molokai Can Be Anywhere: Global Influence in the Twentieth Century History of Hansen's Disease. *Journal of World History* 25(4): 611–28.
- Jarman, Michelle (2017) Race and Disability in US Literature. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, edited by C. Barker and S. Murray. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 155–169.
- Johnstone, David (2001) *An Introduction to Disability Studies: Second Edition*. Oxon: David Fulton Publishers.
- Kame'eleihiwa, Lilikala (1992) *Native Land and Foreign Desires: Pehea La E Pono Ai?* Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press.
- Kern, Emily (2010) Sugarcane and Lepers: Health Policy and the Colonization of Hawaii (1860-1900). *Penn History Review* 17(2): 24.
- Krentz, Christopher (2020) *Elusive Kinship: Disability and Human Rights in Postcolonial Literature*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Mitchell, Donald D. Kilolani (1982) *Resource Units in Hawai'ian Culture*. Revised Edition. Honolulu: Kamehameha Schools.
- Moran, Michelle T. (2007) *Colonizing Leprosy: Imperialism and the Politics of Public Health in the United States*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Norton, Scott A. (2007) Moloka'i. *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* 56(1): 173. doi: 10.1016/j.jaad.2006.06.018.
- Plumwood, Val (2003) Decolonizing Relationships with Nature. In: *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*, edited by W. M. (William M. Adams and M. Mulligan. London: Earthscan Publications, 51–78.
- Pukui, Mary Kawena, and Samuel H. Elbert (1986) *Hawaiian Dictionary Hawaiian- English : Revised and Enlarged Edition*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Russell, E. (2006) Locating Cure: Leprosy and Lois-Ann Yamanaka's Blu's Hanging. *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 31(1): 53–80. doi: 10.1093/melus/31.1.53.
- Said, Edward W. (1997) *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.
- Sherry, Mark (2007) Chapter 1: (Post)Colonising Disability. *Wagadu* 4: 10–22.

- Silva, Noenoe K. (2005) *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism*. London: Duke University Press.
- Smith, Brett, and Andrew C. Sparkes (2008) Narrative and Its Potential Contribution to Disability Studies. *Disability and Society* 23(1): 17–28. doi: 10.1080/09687590701725542.
- Snyder, Sharon L., and David T. Mitchell (2006) *Cultural Locations of Disability*. Chicago: the University of Chicago Press.
- Strange, Carolyn (2004) Symbiotic Commemoration: The Stories of Kalaupapa. *History and Memory* 16(1): 86–117.
- Tanaka, K. M. (2013) Contested Histories and Happiness: Leprosy Literature in Japan. *Health, Culture and Society* 5(1): 99–118. doi: 10.5195/hcs.2013.133.
- Trask, Haunani-Kay (1993) *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Tuck, Eve, and Tuck K. Wayne (2012) Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1(1): 1–40.
- Watson, Keri, and Timothy W. Hiles (2022) Introduction. In: *The Routledge Companion to Art and Disability*, edited by K. Watson and T. W. Hiles. New York and London: Routledge, 1–4.

Dr. KRISTIAWAN INDRIYANTO, S.S., M.Hum., is a lecturer at Universitas Prima Indonesia. He received his Ph.D. in American Studies from Universitas Gadjah Mada (2021). His dissertation explored the issue of ecological imperialism in Hawai'i from a postcolonial ecocriticism framework. His main research interests are analyzing Indigenous literature through a postcolonial ecocriticism perspective, focusing on Native Hawaiian literature and the decolonizing discourses of Hawaiian indigene through the articulation of *aloha 'āina*.

Address: Kristiawan Indriyanto, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Prima Indonesia, Medan City, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Zip Code: 20118, Indonesia. [email: kristiawanindriyanto@unprimdn.ac.id]

Prof. Dr. IDA ROCHANI ADI, S.U., is a full professor in American Studies at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia. Her research interests include Popular Culture, Literature, and Intercultural and Cross-Cultural Studies.

Address: Ida Rochani Adi, Faculty of Cultural Sciences. Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Zip Code: 55281, Indonesia. [email: idaadi@ugm.ac.id]

GALANT NANTA ADHITYA, S.S., M.A is a lecturer at Universitas Respati Yogyakarta. He received his master's in American Studies from Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia. His research interests include Popular Culture, Literature, Intercultural Studies and American Studies.

Address: Galant Nanta Adhitya, English Letters English Literature Department, Faculty of Social Sciences and Economics, Universitas Respati Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Zip Code: 55281, Indonesia [email: galant.nanta@respati.ac.id]



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as image or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.