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## MEMORY AND THE CONVERGENCE OF CULTURES IN KIANA DAVENPORT'S *SHARK DIALOGUES*

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*So it is clear that redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it. And particularly at times when the State takes reality into its own hands, and sets about distorting it, altering the past to fit its present needs, then the making of the alternative realities of art, including the novel of memory, becomes politicized. (Salman Rushdie: Imaginary Homelands, p. 14).*

Kiana Davenport's novel, *Shark Dialogues*, provides an example of the power of memory in the creation of alternative realities and the restoration of the process of cultural memory that has been disrupted by a colonial order. In this novel of epic proportions, Davenport traces six generations of a family line in Hawai'i that begins with Kelonikoa, a fugitive Tahitian princess, and Mathys, a white sailor. The novel opens with the return of four great-great-granddaughters of Kelonikoa and Mathys to their grandmother's coffee plantation on the Big Island of Hawai'i, from their dispersion in various places throughout the world. The four cousins are descended from a multicultural heritage that includes Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Japanese, and European cultures. Once returned to the place where they grew up, their grandmother, Pono, slowly reveals to them their family history and the identity of their grandfather, Duke Kealoha, a Native Hawaiian leper living in exile on Molokai. The story unfolds through the voices of Pono, Run Run (Pono's life-long friend/servant), Duke, Pono's four granddaughters, and several other characters. *Shark Dialogues* is quite overtly what Salman Rushdie calls a 'novel of memory,' from Davenport's opening dedication to 'the memory of my mother' and 'the memory of my aunty,' to Jess's hope in the end that their family history will be 'more beautiful in remembering' (Davenport, 1994: 479).

Davenport's work may be used to establish a theoretical model to help understand the ways people living in a postcolonial social and historical context use cultural memory to construct social identity and resist both the history and effects of colonialism. Hawaiians have long known the power of cultural memory in the construction of identity. For Native Hawaiians, the processes of cultural memory have traditionally included the hula, the chanting of stories and poetry, and the chanting of genealogy.

Hawaiian studies scholar Noenoe K. Silva provides a thorough history and analysis of the role of genealogy, cosmology, chanting, and performance art in Hawaiian culture in Chapter Three of her recent book *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (2004). As many Hawaiian cultural scholars point out, genealogy, as passed down through family memory, is the single most significant factor in constructing identity, superseding all other definitions of identity, including court-imposed definitions of race dating back to 1920, when the United States government determined that Native Hawaiianess is defined by blood quantum for the purpose of distributing Hawaiian homestead lands. According to Hawaiian scholar J. Kehaulani Kauanui, in 'Hawaiian contexts, genealogies connect people to one another, to place, and to landscape' (Young, 1995: 87). And for the well-known Hawaiian scholar John Dominis Holt, Hawaiians are 'the walking repositories of island antiquity: living symbols of a way of life long dead, but which strangely persists in shaping the character of life in the fiftieth state' (Holt, 1995: 23). While *Shark Dialogues* does not presume to have all the answers or to resolve all the conflicts surrounding cultural identity, it does offer a sophisticated critical model for mapping the processes of cultural memory and its role in the construction of identity as characters move from a colonial to a post-colonial identity.

Before proceeding with an analysis of Davenport's use of cultural memory, however, we must consider some assumptions about memory and history. As characters move from a colonial to a post-colonial identity, they must negotiate competing forces of cultural memory that affect history and discourse. The key issue here is the idea of competing forces of memory. This movement calls into question all versions of history, both the official ones and the subversive, resistant ones. The idea that memory and its various forms of expression are subjective recreations of reality or truth, that memory is made by humans entangled in a web of competing social and cultural forces, is a broadly accepted tenet of cultural poetics. According to Jeanette Marie Mageo, in her book *Cultural Memory: Reconfiguring History and Identity in the Postcolonial Pacific* (2001), all cultural memory, in all of its forms, valorizes parts of the past and forgets others. Christine de Lailhacar's work on cultural memory also reminds us that 'the self is not a homogenous entity, but a clamor of competing values and allegiances' (2000: 260). And Robert Borofsky, in his book *Remembrance of Pacific Pasts*, argues that exploring the past is 'often a personal, participatory, empowering experience' (2000: 18). Traditional academic historical renderings and grand narratives, according to Borofsky, are being challenged and disrupted by 'fragmented, contradictory accountings' (Borofsky, 2000: 20). As these scholars point out, the processes of cultural memory, and the resulting products like history and literature, are inherently subjective. All memory is selective and biased, even officially-sanctioned versions of cultural memory. Americans choose to remember Andrew Jackson, for ex-



ample, as a cultural hero worthy of being memorialized by monuments and currency, not as himself a slave owner.

The subjectivity of cultural memory is inevitable, given its multiple and fragmented nature. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer, in the introduction to their book, *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (1999), argue that memory involves continuous reinvention through multiple and differing representations. These representations, they argue, continually transform the past in the present and remind us that we occupy numerous positions in relation to our own, as well other people's, cultural memories. Graham Huggan, in his analysis of cultural memory in postcolonial fiction, sees this stance as a positive view 'shared by those who work toward an enabling definition of cultural memory' as a collective 'activity occurring in the present in which the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future' (Huggan, 2002: 151). Cultural memory, Mageo agrees, is always multivocal, representing 'a host of voices telling tales at odds with the rhetoric in which they are inscribed' (Mageo, 2001: 1). All histories, Mageo reminds us, are collective remembrances whose truth must be questioned and whose power to generate meaning must be recognized. 'We use cultural memory in our everyday lives,' Roxanne Rimstead more recently writes, 'and are in turn used by it to direct our sense of who we are and how we should act as individuals, families, ethnic groups, nations, classes, and genders' (Rimstead, 2003: 1).

Although cultural memory is subjective, multiple, and fragmented, it still remains a powerful creative force in the construction of individual and collective identities. According to Bal, cultural memory has 'displaced and subsumed the discourses of individual (psychological) memory and of social memory' (Bal, 1999: vii). As a collective act, cultural memory is performative. To enter memory events must be narrated in some form; thus writing serves an important role in cultural memory. These narrative memories then become the norm by which to measure the past, present, and future. And as Graham Huggan (who has written about Australian cultural memory) argues, the literary text may serve as 'a powerful medium for the exploration of cultural memory constructed in tension with the hegemonic narratives of the imperial past' (Huggan, 2002: 152). This 'oppositional model' of cultural memory, according to Huggan, has three potential dangers: 1) collective memory can be reactionary and used to justify or perpetuate oppressive traditional practices; 2) the model lends itself to out-moded distinctions between the 'mnemonic capabilities' of oral and written cultures; and 3) the model overlooks the ways memory is used to support neocolonial relations of power within postcolonial nations (152). Meili Steele also expresses concerns about the dangers of cultural memory. For Steele, many postcolonial theories and theories of dialogic cultural memory reject the postcolonial notion of the other as existing only in juxtaposition to colonial culture, but argues that a dialogue exists between various cultural traditions. The problem, Steele contends, is that these

theories may 'juxtapose previously separated narratives and discourses without offering any guidelines for what the ensuing dialogue might look like or what the consequences of this confrontation might be for each side' (Steele, 2000: 276).

A final assumption before proceeding with an analysis of Davenport's use of cultural memory is the idea that such memory is also hybrid. Edward Said, in his seminal work, *Culture and Imperialism*, writes, 'At the same time, paradoxically, we have never been as aware as we are now of how oddly hybrid historical and cultural experiences are, of how they partake of many often contradictory experiences and domains, cross national boundaries, defy the police action of simple dogma and loud patriotism' (Said, 1994: 115). As a hybrid entity, cultural memory, as Mageo asserts, takes place where cultural processes intersect, 'between social and subjective experience, between cultural selves and others, between valorized and discarded histories and identities, semiotic and political domains, precolonial and colonial pasts and the present, and, in the Pacific, between dominating colonizers and the disenfranchised colonized' (Mageo, 2001: 3). Homi Bhabha refers to these cultural intersections as the 'in-between spaces,' the 'interstices,' created 'in the articulation of cultural differences' (Bhabha, 1994: 1), which reveal that the '... social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation' (Bhabha, 1994: 2). This theme of hybridity is central to Davenport's *Shark Dialogues* and is fully addressed in my recent article, 'Cultural Hybridity in Kiana Davenport's *Shark Dialogues*.' (Spencer, 2005). However, the relevant point here is the recognition that cultural memory is hybrid, something that contributes in important ways to its central multiplicity.

Davenport uses cultural memory in *Shark Dialogues* to create an alternative reality and transform identity. The novel reveals the complexity and challenges facing those negotiating the space where cultural processes intersect. *Shark Dialogues* suggests something that has become a significant pattern in many contemporary American novels. Characters move through various stages from a colonial to a post-colonial identity, as they ultimately seek to define a new identity that is both integrated and liberated.

## COLONIAL IDENTITY

As *Shark Dialogues* opens, each of Pono's four granddaughters inhabits the initial stage in the movement to post-colonial identity, in which their identities have been determined by their positions within a colonial order. In the initial stage, as colonial subjects, the main character and/or characters are struggling with identity in various ways. In this stage identity is constructed within the context of colonial cultural memory through colonial history and discourse, and in their different struggles with identity, each of the characters feels displaced, both emotionally and physically. In different ways, all of the characters are separated from their families, cultural heritage, and com-



munities. Those still living in Hawai'i are emotionally alienated from family and community and those living away from Hawai'i are both emotionally and physically separated from their families and their pasts. Their identities have been determined by their positions within a colonial order. As Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, the colonial order has 'the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging' (Said, 1994: xiii). This power, for Said, provides the central means of connection between culture and imperialism. Such a past, construed within a hegemonic colonial order, is not completely relevant to those who were or are its victims, as are the characters in *Shark Dialogues*.

The primary character, Jess, a veterinarian living in New York, feels alienated from her daughter and ex-husband and displaced in the urban landscape. In the opening chapter she recalls 'the day she understood she was excluded from their [her husband's and daughter's] world' (Davenport, 1994: 5). Her daughter, Anna, hides her mother's native identity from her friends, who, she fears, would call her mother and aunts "darkies" (Davenport, 1994: 217). Further adding to her feelings of alienation, Jess's ex-husband is a white southerner who, Jess recalls, 'never went home with me. Never saw Hawai'i. It was like he loved half of me, my father's white, Southern half, so the other half didn't exist' (Davenport, 1994: 304). Vanya, an attorney and Hawaiian activist who has been living in Australia and New Zealand, is tortured by her irresistible, destructive attraction to a white man. After a failed marriage and the death of her son, Vanya feels 'that who she was was no longer a fixed text' (Davenport, 1994: 12). Rachel marries a Yakuza, a member of the Japanese underworld, who defines her solely as a sexual object, acting out elaborate sexual fantasies each time he returns from his frequent business trips to Asia. For twenty-three years of marriage, her husband 'kept her on her carousel of make-believe,' where she now finds herself 'in a state of arrest, of female infantilism' (Davenport, 1994: 15). Ming, who is suffering from a terminal illness and is addicted to heroin, recalls the confusion of her mixed-marriage childhood, 'Am I Buddhist or Catholic?' (Davenport, 1994: 20). Each of the four granddaughters is confused and alienated, searching for ways to reconcile the seemingly disparate parts of their identities.

The granddaughters' confusion is the result of a colonial discourse that sees them as less than whole, as deficient, as mongrel. The offspring of the Tahitian princess, Kelonikoa, and the white sailor, Mathys, are considered mixed-breeds by both of their cultures, never fully able to embrace either side of their heritage. 'Half-caste children,' Davenport writes, 'were considered blessed with the superiority of white blood, cursed with the native half' (Davenport, 1994: 53). Mars, Jess's enlightened black friend in New York, expresses the confusion that each granddaughter is feeling. 'You despise yourself, can't wait to mortify your own flesh, wipe out your race,' Mars tells Jess, 'Half of you is white, the other half is running scared' (Davenport, 1994: 301). Jess, like her cousins, is 'trying to understand' (Davenport, 1994: 301), but pieces of their past are

hidden from them, since the only version of the past they know is the one from the colonial perspective.

## RECOGNITION

Characters must first recognize the processes of colonial history and discourse before they are able to begin reconstructing their pasts and constructing new identities. In this stage, characters move to a recognition of the processes of colonial history and discourse. As a result of their position within a colonial order, characters often feel displaced or torn between competing worlds—that of the colonizers and that of the native or indigenous culture. This position causes disharmony in a variety of forms, which is most commonly expressed through images of illness and alienation from family and community. They realize, quite consciously, that they have been constructed through colonial discourse. They see their struggles with identity, their sickness and alienation, as the result of a colonial history within which they are objects of colonial ideology. They must realize that they have been constructed through colonial discourse and see their sickness and alienation as the result of such colonial history. Davenport's chronicling of history, according to J.K. Donaldson, represents the characters' 'growth of awareness and understanding of their multi-faceted heritage' (Donaldson, 1997: 232). However, the level of awareness is much deeper than a mere understanding of their multicultural heritage. Amaryll Chanady discusses the ways in which cultural memory is invented and replaces officially sanctioned colonial versions of the past. The process of cultural memory, Chanady writes, 'always involves a complex process of selection and transformation that raises problems of representation, access to privileged channels of expression and competing constructions of the imaginary community' (Chanady, 2000: 183). Cultural memory is, then, a hegemonic process in which various individuals and groups intervene. At various points in their lives, the characters achieve an awareness of the ways in which they have been victims of the hegemonic process of colonial history.

Ming is the first to reach an awareness and understanding of her identity, perhaps as a result of her painful battles with disease. Over the years her cousins come to her 'needy, wanting to know how to live, how not to be brutalized' (Davenport, 1994: 20). She recognizes that each of them is driven by a 'search for one's self' (Davenport, 1994: 20). Ming's eventual death prompts Pono to call her granddaughters home so that she may begin to tell them their family history. When Jess's daughter tells her that she is throwing her life away to return to the islands, Jess says, "Anna, do you know what you are? You're a racist, a woman ashamed of her blood" (Davenport, 1994: 304). When Rachel's Yakuza husband dies, she dries his tattooed skin and hangs it on the wall as a reminder of her life of sexual servitude. Vanya's experience as a student at the University of Hawai'i with racist peers and college professors helps her 'begin to understand oppression' (Davenport, 1994: 194). Unlike her cousins, however,



Vanya's awareness leads her to direct political activism, even to the point of what authorities label terrorist acts against the symbols of colonial power. Although they reach awareness in different ways, each of the granddaughters comes to recognize that they have been victimized by colonial history.

## RECLAMATION

Once each character is able to recognize and understand the ways in which their identities have been determined by colonial history and discourse, they are able to reclaim this history and discourse, as part of a larger community sharing a vibrant culture in the present and a deep-seated memory of its past. From this position, characters are able to move to a third stage in which characters begin to retell their histories, recounting historical events from the perspective of the marginalized colonial other.

The nature of such collective memory was first explored by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920's, who argued that memories are constructed by social groups which determine what is worth remembering and how things should be remembered. Although Halbwachs made the distinction between social memories that are written and those that are not, contemporary scholars in the social sciences generally treat all collective memory as the product of social groups, and not objective truth. This position is supported by Alan Baddeley, who has studied the psychology of memory. Baddeley admits that memory is fallible, but forgetting is 'benign' because we remember what is important and forget what is not, and when we need to remember something we write it down (Baddeley, 1989: 58). The point is that all cultural memory, in all of its forms, is collective representation, and, therefore, selective and fluid. According to Chanady, postcolonial cultural memory creates a 'usable past' with its own 'themes, motifs, legends, and proper names' that provides a counter narrative to colonial discourse (Chanady, 2000: 189), and this is seconded by Roxanne Rimstead, who also writes that, 'Marginalized subjects recover a usable past for the purpose of constructing a countermemory based on dignity and protest' (Rimstead, 2003: 6).

With regard specifically to Hawai'i, the now well-known interchange between Roger M. Keesing, anthropologist, and Haunani-Kay Trask, scholar of Native Hawaiian studies suggests that the nature of reclamation is under debate. Keesing argues that Hawaiians must reinvent a pre-colonial cultural tradition that has long since been destroyed (Keesing 2006: 73). What survives, Keesing argues, is sanctified and mythologized, even when altered in its forms (Keesing, 2006: 73). Trask argues that Keesing and many anthropologists devalue history as remembered and told by native people. The recognition that all cultural memory is selective and subjective does not, however, negate its power to construct reality. This recognition certainly does not refute the power that colonial history and discourse has exerted on cultures and individuals;



therefore, the recognition that postcolonial memory is selective and subjective does not refute its power to resist colonial history and to construct postcolonial identities.

In *Shark Dialogues* the family's history parallels the history of colonialism in Hawai'i. The initial meeting between Kelanikoa and Mathys takes place at the historical moment when the Hawaiian people lose their sovereignty. From that moment onward, Davenport chronicles the loss of land, the devastation of the Hawaiian population by Western diseases, the subjugation of workers in the plantation system, the overthrow of Queen Liliuokalani, the annexation of Hawai'i by the United States, the effect of Pearl Harbor and World War II, environmental destruction, nuclear contamination, and the impact of development. Each historical moment is retold from the perspective of the victims of colonial history. When Roosevelt came to visit the islands, he wanted to see an example of the 'islands' majestic 'aborigines,' a stately reminder of what Hawaiians had once been' (Davenport, 1994: 147). In church and school, Hawaiian children were forbidden to speak Hawaiian while being taught about a white Jesus. As many Hawaiians began abandoning their 'old religion, dress and customs completely,' colonial discourse constructed them as a romantic, vanishing race, noble savages doomed to extinction by the advance of progress (Davenport, 1994: 56). Pono sees and understands fully the results of colonial history. "That's how they see us," Pono says, "Porters, servants. Hula dancers, clowns. They never see us as we are, complex, ambiguous, inspired humans" (Davenport, 1994: 338). Hawaiian culture has been reduced to clichés for the enjoyment of tourists. According to Rimstead, since the state and dominant groups are able to manipulate the past to serve their interests in the present, it is the task of 'dissident groups or individuals to construct counter-memory to oppose state control' (Rimstead, 2003: 2). As Said points out, this presents a challenge to colonial authority. Said writes, 'But only recently have Westerners become aware that what they have to say about the history and the cultures of "subordinate" peoples is challengeable by the people themselves, people who a few years back were simply incorporated, culture, land, and history, and all, into the great Western empires, and their disciplinary discourses' (Said, 1994: 195). 'For the first time,' Said tells us, 'Westerners have been required to confront themselves not simply as the Raj but as representatives of a culture and even of races accused of crimes—crimes of violence, crimes of suppression, crimes of conscience' (Said, 1994: 195). Davenport's presentation of historical events forces readers to confront the history of colonialism from the perspective of those affected by it, rather than that of those who perpetrated it.

## POST-COLONIAL IDENTITY

Once characters achieve an awareness of history and the ways in which they have been defined by colonial discourse, they are able, in the words of Salman Rushdie, to begin to construct 'alternative realities.' (Rushdie, 1991: 14). In the fourth and final



stage, characters begin to construct new identities. This stage, often taking the form of healing and reconciliation, occurs through the recuperation of cultural and family memory. This stage of post-colonial cultural memory is emergent and in process, involving at one and the same time the past, present, and future. Davenport's resulting postcolonial discourse is textual in the Western narrative tradition, using English, the language of the colonizers, and the novel form. However, the dialogic character of both the language and the story also allows the writer to create a new resistant, collective, and hybrid text, making use of the very same language as that of the colonial text.

Cultural memory helps the characters to construct a new definition of identity, to heal the pain of the past, and ultimately claim their own future. As the characters learn their true genealogy, J. K. Donaldson rightly points out, they achieve 'wholeness' and 'unity' (Donaldson, 1997: 231). Donaldson also rightly concludes that the characters' awareness of their heritage is the 'single most important element in their development as characters' (Donaldson, 1997: 232). However, in limiting his analysis to the novel's style and form, Donaldson's analysis does not identify the ways in which collective family memory leads to the characters' awareness and wholeness. For the four granddaughters in *Shark Dialogues*, Pono must provide the final pieces in the puzzle of their identity, the 'unraveled narrative they needed to solve' (Davenport, 1994: 9). Pono is initially resistant, seeing her granddaughters as 'half of something else' (Davenport, 1994: 231). For Pono, it is their white blood that makes them deficient. However, Duke convinces her of the need, the importance of memory. 'I confess,' Duke says to Pono, 'to remembering' (Davenport, 1994: 277). Pono reminds him of their vow to forget the past, to 'not mourn what could have been' (Davenport, 1994: 277). He responds by saying, 'What is the difference? Memory. Dreams. At this age it's much the same' (Davenport, 1994: 277). Eventually Pono realizes that without the cultural memory that she and Duke are able to provide, her granddaughters will be 'women without history' (Davenport, 1994: 282).

Of course, the granddaughters are not without history—they simply have the wrong version of history. As the granddaughters return to Pono's plantation, a 'refuge from a world that would corrupt them,' Pono remembers the image of her daughters in the starched blue uniforms of school and says, 'I failed my daughters. I was silent in ten thousand tongues. In this way, I slaughtered them' (Davenport, 1994: 323, 325). This experience is a common one recounted by many Hawaiians. Trask, writes, 'When I was young the story of my people was told twice: once by my parents, then again by my school teachers. From my ohana (family), I learned about the life of the old ones' (113). Ultimately, the telling of family memory will uncorrupt the granddaughters, allowing them to reconstruct their identities. Pono comes to understand the power the telling of memory holds—that it can open to them new, previously hidden vistas of experience. She says to her granddaughters, 'Now. I am going to tell you a story.

When I finish . . . you will know who you are' (Davenport, 1994: 326). As she begins to recount the past, she gains 'access to a world that had remained invisible, therefore not real, until the telling' (Davenport, 1994: 328). This telling of memory will undo colonial history and redefine identity. After Pono dies, her granddaughter, Jess, takes on the responsibility of continuing the family story. 'What would be more valuable than genealogy,' she asks, 'She could do that for them, begin the backward journey. Their heirs would have the wealth of history to aim at life' (Davenport, 1994: 476). The telling of their history will be 'more beautiful in the remembering' (Davenport, 1994: 479). In the last pages of the novel she speaks the names of her family, beginning with Keloni-koa and continuing to her sisters and cousins, whose lives are 'still attached and flowing, in myths, dreams, imaginings. Lives permanent because someone, Jess, was there to pass them on' (Davenport, 1994: 479). As a contemporary Hawaiian woman, Jess will write their history, thus constructing a post-colonial reality that fuses individual, family, and cultural histories. The resulting postcolonial discourse, exemplified by Davenport, is textual but dialogic; the writer is able to write a new collective, hybrid, resistant text using the same language that wrote the colonial text. At the end of the novel, Jess 'drew from her bag a pen and sheet of paper. She would start with the story she knew best. Pono and Grandfather. She would work her way backward. What she did not know they would tell her' (Davenport, 1994: 480). The novel ends with the Hawaiian word, 'Imua,' which means 'go forward, press on.'

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