

Mauna Kea: Where the Cosmos Meet Settler Colonialism

Introduction

The Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) has impressive support from universities and research institutes from the US, Japan, China, India, and Canada ("About"). Yet as farsighted as the telescope's lenses are, the TMT International Observatory (TIO) failed to forecast the backlash the project has garnered.

The TMT is slated for construction on Mauna Kea, a sacred mountain on Hawai'i that is integral to the religion and culture of the Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians). Ongoing protests have stalled the construction of the TMT. The TIO's response and presentation of Ho'Omana Hawai'i religious views and 'modern' astronomy as antagonists extend settler colonialist interests.



Occupy Hilo. "TMT Blockade on Mauna Kea." Flickr, 7 October 2014, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/occupyhilo/15512230232/in/photostream/>

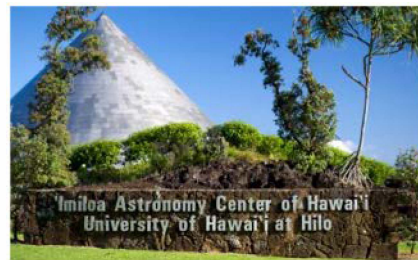
Theory and Methods

Settler colonialism is a structure that requires continuous reinforcement rather than a discrete event. The ultimate goal of the settlers is to completely replace the original inhabitants of the land and to create the perception that this process is natural, an illusion that is broken by the visible existence of the indigenous (Wolfe).

Narratives that support settler colonialist interests are examined via primary and secondary sources. This includes messaging and data presented on TIO member websites, along with analyses of discussions occurring in academic journals.

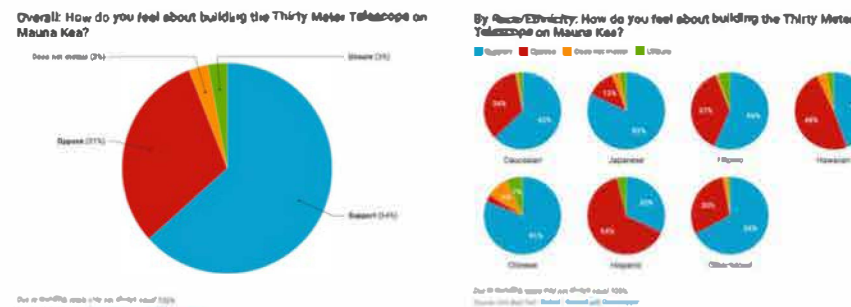
Findings

- The TIO seeks to gain access to Mauna Kea, despite a previous state audit that found the land had been mismanaged and prevented Kanaka Maoli from performing cultural traditions (Swanner 302).
- Stressing Hawaii's multiculturalism reduces Kanaka Maoli to a minority status, erasing their unique position as the original inhabitants of the islands and exploiting internal divides (Casumbal-Salazar 13).
- The TIO, most notably the 'Imiloa museum, selectively appropriates symbols of Polynesian navigation. Astronomy is depicted as a natural extension of Hawaiian culture with equal claim to Mauna Kea.



"Interior and Exterior of 'Imiloa." 'Imiloa, <https://imiloahawaii.org/aboutimiloa>. Accessed 6 October 2020.

TMT is supported by people of all ethnic groups, including native Hawaiians.



"Why People Support Us." TMT Thirty Meter Telescope, <https://www.maunakeaandtmt.org/#support>. Accessed 6 October 2020.



- Astronomy is presented as equivalent with progress, divorcing it from the historical utilization of science to justify the 'civilizing' of other cultures via colonialization (Chambers and Gillespie 224). Kanaka Maoli are stereotypically presented as the 'backwards' Native, promoting the delegitimization of the indigenous that settler colonialism relies upon.

"Email from UC Berkeley Astronomy Professor." *Forbes*, Janet Stremwedel, 12 June 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/janetstremwedel/2015/06/12/the-thirty-meter-telescope-reveals-ethical-challenges-for-the-astronomy-community/?sh=188ac0b76902>

Conclusions

The TMT and undoubtedly bring many benefits to the islands. The TIO provides jobs and revenue, supports community charities, and places Hawaii at the forefront of astronomical research. The 'Imiloa Museum offers educational opportunities for students entering the STEM field. However, the TIO and their supporters have consistently reduced Native concerns to an aversion to science.

Recognizing that astronomy on Mauna Kea plays into familiar settler colonialism narratives paves the way for actionable change within the field. Already, the protests on Mauna Kea have caused some astronomers to advocate for the use of an anti-colonialist lens, to respect Native rights, and to include Native knowledge holders in decision making processes (Prescod-Weinstein 3-5). Yet, the TMT remains slated for construction.



"TMT on Mauna Kea". TMT International Observatory, <https://www.tmt.org/page/our-story-in-hawaii>

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