April 15, 2015

Office of the Board of Regents
University of Hawai‘i
2444 Dole Street, Bachman Hall
Room 209
Honolulu, Hawai‘i 96822

Dear Regents:

Mahalo for allowing me this opportunity to send testimony regarding the management of Mauna Kea and the Mauna Kea Science Reserve.

I was born and raised in Honolulu and currently live in Kea‘au, on Hawai‘i Island. I am a Ph.D. candidate in Anthropology at Columbia University in New York, and have engaged Mauna Kea from multiple angles since 2001, including museum ethnologic study through Bishop Museum in Honolulu and independent ethnographic work.

I am writing to express my opposition to the continued construction of TMT on Mauna Kea.

There are many things to say. As a student of societies and a student of Mauna Kea this case of telescope development reflects old and repetitive habits of (neo)liberal settler states, where discrimination and subjugation are justified through processes of misrepresentation and exploitation; where “science” maintains the privilege of invisibility and the support of racial privilege and wealth; and where individuals are captured and captivated by perpetual states of “cruel optimism”: attachments to clusters of promises that inhibit the very achievement of flourishing life.

It strikes me that pro-TMT parties, who claim to be leading us to some “advanced” future, ground their justification of telescope construction on 18th century racist imaginations of unilineal evolution—wherein the human race is moving from savagery toward civilization along a linear path that terminates in European standards—as well as Truman-doctrine, Cold-War period ideals of development and advancement through heavy-handed military, economic, and political intervention. These kinds of actions and discursions are old colonial customs, used to justify domination of others and sanction unethical behavior. They are sustained in moments where people make decisions that reinforce these oppressive beliefs and projects.

Through unflinching support of telescope development on the mountain, the University continuously renews itself as part of this tyrannical project. The approval of the latest venture, TMT, by the University, can thereby be seen as an act that directly perpetuates the injustice against na kanaka ʻōiwi o Hawai‘i with the overthrow of Queen Lili‘uokalani. Approval also reinforces TMT’s arguments that some races, religions, sciences, and cultures are more important (or less important) than others. It promotes the cultivation of singular ideas of knowledge and advancement, as well as wealth, democracy, and well-being, where the mimicry of capitalist, hegemonic, heteropatriarchal systems is valued and rewarded over ingenuity, responsibility, care, critical thinking, social engagement, and ethics. It entrenches the social ills of delusion, apathy, desire in University practices. With a pro-TMT decision, the University itself would come to be known, quite broadly with the help of social media, as a space prepared to manufacture bodies for purchase into economic systems that denigrate life.

By accepting the nomination for your position on the Board of Regents I imagine you tether your decisions to the University’s mission: to ground University actions in kanaka ʻōiwi values of “kuleana, ‘ohana, and ahupua’a”; to create an environment in which students’ intellectual growth and success is marked by creative and critical thinking and contribution to society; to build a community where “free exchange of ideas, shared intellectual resources, cutting edge scholarship, and high academic expectations” foster a “fertile, engaged, and ethical learning environment.” UH Hilo’s mission furthers its
responsibility by stating, “Our kuleana is to improve the quality of life of the people of Hawai‘i, the Pacific region, and the world.”

In this decision on TMT, I ask that you take time with the foundational terms embedded in the mission, questioning the valences and potentials of each of these as part of a broader question of what it means to educate. What it means to hold, in trust, this responsibility to ahupua‘a. To ‘ohana. I ask that you (re)consider what advancement might look like, especially during a time when unpredictable changes in the climate and environment are certain, and the human race will necessitate both distinct ways of knowing everything that surrounds it, and good practices of living together as community. Western science and individualism seem ill-suited for this task.

What distinguishes Hawai‘i is not that we have a high mountain perfect for astronomy. It is that we live amongst people who have technologies of paying attention to this island environment. Who know how to know Mauna Kea, and the stars, and the trees, and all kinds of forms of life, as forms both external and internal to themselves. These are people who have cultivated a science that methodically observes and tests, that relies on theories embedded in knowledge built over millennia, and that teaches this knowledge through flexible forms and continued refinement. What distinguishes this science is that it does not hold the impossible tenet of objectivity at its core, but rather checks to see if it is consistently imbued with deep respect, awe, care, and love, for that which it engages, and when it engages, it engages a singular phenomena in relation to an entire system, rather than the single thing apart from and superior to all other things. This science already understands things that divisions of Western science have yet to imagine, because these things cannot be seen through microscopes, or through telescopes. It realizes, at inception, that it is in reverence of dark matter, rather than frantic eradication of it, that wisdom is gained. These people, who know these things, are not of some imagined past. They are right here, right now.

The University has the opportunity, as it sits on this world stage making an important decision, to distinguish itself as an anti-racist—not anti-science—institution. It can become the University of Hawai‘i, rather than a university in Hawai‘i. It could be known as a place where students learn another kind of science, with methods that require, along with deep study of the thing, deep study of the self, deep study of relationship, sustained attention, interconnectedness; results would proffer new insights into practical designs for a world searching for a new understanding of itself.

I imagine you were selected as regents, in part, because you have the ability to be visionary, to set, rather than follow, trends. I hope deeply that you can envision what it would mean to be truly extraordinary among institutions of higher education around the world, and that you will accept Hawai‘i’s remarkability in the forms in which it comes.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share my thoughts.

Sincerely,

Ann M. Iwashita
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1 Missions of UHM and UHH in the 2014 catalogs of the respective schools.