Dear University of Hawaii Board of Hawaii Regents members,

My motivation to write this springs from a strong sense of urgency. Over the past few weeks, the anti-TMT movement has grown exponentially, and although one might be tempted to attribute it to misinformation, lack of education, or even a superficial desire to get noticed, I believe the real root of it runs far deeper than that.

The desire for recognition is present within all of us. If someone ignores the things that are important to you (or even worse, claims they’re not actually important), it’s hard not to get upset. For many years, Hawaiians were told by colonists that their way of being in the world was inferior to the colonial way and were expected to assimilate to what was considered a more “refined” way of life. It’s natural to feel upset when someone assumes that your lifestyle is inferior to theirs and that, if you have common sense, you’ll quickly adapt to their way of doing things. For example, locals have been told, over and over, that talking pidgin sounds “dumb” and expected to learn standard English rather than the other way around.

Although a lot of Native Hawaiian cultural revival has taken place, there’s still a long way to go. I’ve been working in the Hawaii public school system for almost two years now -- first as a teaching assistant, and now as a substitute teacher -- and I’ve witnessed firsthand the detrimental effects of a misunderstanding between cultures. Too often, teachers assume that, if a given student is not succeeding, it’s the student’s fault. Such teachers don’t stop to consider that, perhaps, the problem has more to do with poor delivery of educational material than lack of motivation on the student’s part. I believe this type of communication reflects a much broader problem: too often, people of a privileged background assume that, when someone doesn’t agree with them, it’s because that someone is less educated rather than educated differently. It’s like saying, “If you were as educated as I am, you’d agree with me.” Over and over, I’ve seen this logic appear in pro-TMT arguments. According to such people, TMT opposition is grounded in “anti-science,” and/or “New Age” beliefs and is downright “embarrassing.” Another line of argument holds that people “just want the attention” or that they’re “bored” and have nothing better to do.

I certainly believe that the Comprehensive Management Plan is not as comprehensive as it’s generally made out to be by TMT advocates (because, among other reasons, it only applies to land managed by the UH) and that a more thorough assessment ought to take place before TMT advocates even consider moving forward. More importantly, however, I believe that the above arguments gloss over fact that, to TMT opponents, it’s not just about utility. Mauna Kea is
sacred, that is, a holy place, a place of worship, a place that people revere and
dream about; it plays a vital role in their concept of self (one could argue it even
constitutes a part of them. Hence, desecrating it would amount to desecrating
them). Not surprisingly, then, the potential building of the TMT strikes an
emotional chord in people; something that plays a major role of significance for
them is being threatened. Although native species would be threatened (and this is
certainly of a concern), the anxiety TMT opponents feel reaches far beyond sheer
numbers. A place of utmost mental and emotional significance is being threatened.

We cannot reduce the value of something to the sheer utility it would yield. The
mental and emotional -- which, even though they’re not as tangible as the physical
(at least not initially) -- are just as significant. In fact, they’re inextricably
intertwined (i.e., the mental can affect the physical and vice versa). The growing
number of TMT opponents have made clear that a very large number of us feel
threatened by the TMT and believe it would put Mauna Kea in jeopardy. Even if
the mountain could bear the brunt of the telescope, it’s unnecessary, and this
mountain was first and foremost a place of worship, awe, and reverence. Hawaiian
voices resounded loud and clear during the Hawaiian Renaissance in the 1970s,
and so they do today. Yes, Hawaiians are enjoying the recognition they’re
receiving. There’s NOTHING wrong with this, however. When your culture has
been suffocated for years and years, it’s EXCITING to be heard for once. The
TMT is just the tip of the iceberg. The fact that social media has enabled so many
Hawaiian voices to be heard is exciting indeed! As I begin to witness the fruits of
this empowering movement, I am filled with both awe and inspiration. Mahalo for
hearing me out.

Sincerely,

Mariah Partida