In January my husband, son, and I flew to Kauai, one of the smaller islands in the Hawaiian archipelago. We’d never been to Hawaii before, and considered it kind of a belated honeymoon. In fact, I’d wanted to go ever since I watched my friends from Sesame Street travel to Hawaii with Buffy Ste. Marie in 1978.

It was blissful. Warm, sunny, and – my favourite part – filled with flowers. Hibiscus, ginger, orchids, birds of paradise. Coming from grey, wintry Pennsylvania, the colour was wonderful. Little wonder that guidebooks call Kauai “the Garden Isle.”

Wonderful, that is, until we took a tour of the National Tropical Botanical Garden, and as we wandered through groves of bamboo and palm trees, the guide told us that there are no flowering plants native to the island. An island now covered with – indeed, identified by – its flowers.*

An island, too, where a loaf of bread costs nine dollars, because most food has to be shipped in; but where you can visit the largest coffee plantation in the United States. Where, according to the 2010 census, only 9.1% of residents identify as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

This is a garden, indeed. A garden is a space of nature that has been carefully crafted and curated by human intent, by introducing some things and removing others, according to our desire.

Visiting Kauai was a little like visiting the past.

When we talk about sustainability we assume some kind of global dimension, in either the problem (food, water, air) or the solution (COPs for climate change, or other transnational treaties). But it’s an abstraction, for the most part, in the background to whatever action we try to enact closer to home. That’s why certain images (Earthrise), metaphors (Spaceship Earth), and aphoristic formulas (think globally, act locally; triple bottom line) have such appeal, because they give us a tidy mental icon for what are really messy, often distant issues.

At the same time, sustainability as a concept has been framed as exclusively forward-looking. Whether reactive (the ozone hole) or anticipatory (peak oil), it assumes a crisis and the desire
to “sustain” an ecological feature, or more commonly, a population and its way of life, into the years ahead.

In fact, “think globally” was a real, lived experience and directive for much of the world hundreds of years before the blue box.

The aggressive expansion of European empires from the sixteenth century onward accelerated, required, and lionized the transnational movements of natural resources and peoples around the world for political and economic advantage. The world we live in and consume is the product of that.

Let’s return to Hawaii as an example. (No, really. My son keeps asking to go back to “da beach.”) For many Americans, the description of Hawaii as “the crossroads of the Pacific” refers to the archipelago’s critical strategic value during World War II. But crossroads means more than that. Many of the plants found on the islands (taro, ginger, yams, and some of those flowers I loved) are called “canoe plants” because they were brought by Polynesian migrants in dugout canoes thousands of years ago. When Captain James Cook and his crew landed on Kauai in 1778, they introduced something else: diseases that over time decimated the indigenous population by up to 90%.

By the mid-nineteenth century American missionaries and business interests cultivated the islands in new ways, acquiring large amounts of land for, in particular, sugarcane and rice. (Governments of France, Britain, Spain, Japan, and others continued to show “interest.”) Exporting these foods to a growing American market in turn required importing labour from numerous other countries to grow them. American interests in Hawaiian territory eventually propelled outright annexation, blending economic and political control. (The first governor of the territory of Hawaii and the founder of the Hawaiian Pineapple Company, the forerunner to the Dole Foods, were first cousins.) Over the course of the twentieth century, Hawaii began to supply Americans with something else: an exotic destination in tourism and for visual consumption in everything from South Pacific to Hawaii 5-0, and the tellingly-named Fantasy Island.

Today you can tour the Kilohana Plantation on Kauai, 105 acres growing small plots of nothing indigenous to the island, and then sample rum, made from sugarcane, at the plantation house. The same landscape is being used to meet external markets, but now these are tourists from the mainland. But the older patterns persist. The top four industries in Hawaii are “visitors, defense, raw sugar and molasses and fresh and processed pineapple.” So I – about 100,000 people like me each month – can visit Kauai. And I can buy Hawaiian pineapple at a Weis supermarket in central Pennsylvania.

So to a discussion about the global nature of sustainability, the historian would say:
- Consider la longue durée – a time scale of centuries, at least, to seek the roots of modernity.
- We can’t predict the future, but we can identify “tipping points” when human intervention changed the trajectory, or inertia, of historical patterns. What provokes them or makes them successful? Is it economic crisis (or incentive)? Is it technological ingenuity? Philosophical consensus, as in the gradual change in thinking about abolition?

- Look down at the ground where you are. To what extent is your home place itself a product of imported and exported goods, ideas, and peoples? What has been displaced, and for whose benefit? What do you need to live, live well? Can we, as Graeme Wynn has written, “recalibrate our expectations, to acknowledge that fewer material comforts, more dependence on local production and higher expenditures attributable to charging the true environmental and social costs of automobiles and other modern technologies will be part of our futures.”¹ Can we think of our choices as making our own habitat?

* Winds and birds may well have carried seeds of flowering plants to the Hawaiian islands before human migrants did, but his message seemed to be that the flowers visible today are exclusively human introductions.

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