

Putting feathers on our words: Kaona as a decolonial aesthetic practice in Hawaiian literature¹

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Abstract

In this essay, I examine contemporary literary examples of “kaona connectivity,” the ways that kaona requires Hawaiians to connect with our kūpuna and with each other, as an affirmation of our aesthetic sovereignty. I begin by offering a reading of the kaona within Donovan Kūhiō Colleps’ “Kāhulu” to discuss kaona as an intellectual and aesthetic practice. I then discuss Hawaiian literary aesthetics and aesthetic sovereignty before giving close readings of contemporary literary works for their kaona. Specifically, I examine a short story by John Dominis Holt, as well as poems and art by Imaikalani Kalahale, who both employ kaona to connect Hawaiians with the Kumulipo, a genealogical chant tracing the last two monarchs of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i to the beginning of the universe. I conclude with a discussion of the Kumulipo’s continued cultural, spiritual, and political significance and the power of Hawaiian aesthetic sovereignty.

Keywords: *decolonization; aesthetics; Indigenous; Hawaii; literature*

¹ This essay is dedicated to ku‘u kaikamahine, Kaikainali‘i Hāle‘ta, and ku‘u kāne, Craig Santos Perez. Mahalo piha e Donovan Kūhiō Colleps, John Dominis Holt, and Imaikalani Kalahale for dedicating your lives to expressing the beauty, intelligence, and aloha of our people. Mahalo nui e Noenoe Silva, Craig Santos Perez, and *Decolonization*’s reviewers for your aloha, mana‘o akamai, kōkua, and kāko‘o. Any errors in this essay are mine alone.

Introduction

Kāhulu

Our kūpuna put feathers
on our words
and the rain beads.

And we glide,
rising and diving,
piercing sea skin.

Marks for mating
signal verb tongues
from beak to beak.

And we fall
into outspread wings
waiting to welcome us home.

Our kūpuna put feathers
on our words as storms
come, go, linger.

Our feathers scatter
the light and keep
our stories warm.

They harmonize us into the land
with no lines to question
where it ends and we begin.

Our kūpuna put feathers on our words
to remind us how wonderful it is
to ruffle our bodies in the stream.

The above poem, “Kāhulu,”² by Donovan Kūhiō Colleps, demonstrates the practice of kaona by connecting the “hulu” (feathers) of “manu” (birds) with “kāhulu,” a grammatical term that may be translated as “modifier”, as it is commonly used in Hawaiian language classes to teach modifying phrases. Through punning, metaphor, and cultural symbolism, all of which are part of the practice of kaona, Colleps examines his own experience learning ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i as a carrier

² This poem was previously published in Donovan Kūhiō Colleps’ chapbook, *Proposed Additions* (TinFish Press, 2014).

of our ancestral culture, articulates a cultural perspective of literary aesthetics, and expresses and demonstrates kaona as a literary aesthetic standard.

Kaona is an intellectual practice (one that is literary, rhetorical, pedagogical, and compositional) in Hawaiian³ Literature, often defined as “hidden meaning;” however, it is more exact to say that kaona refers to meaning hidden out in the open, with a range of both the “hiddenness” and “openness” of meaning engaged. That is, the practice of kaona allows for meaning to be hidden in such a way as to seem ornamental, trivial, or merely imagistic—with seemingly innocent meaning—to those unfamiliar with what George Kanahēle (1986) calls “the language of symbols” with which, as cultural practice, Hawaiians ‘spoke’ alongside our “native tongue” (p. 47). Inclusive of allusion, symbolism, punning, and metaphor, kaona draws on the collective knowledges and experiences of Hawaiians, recognizing these knowledges and experiences as unique, while also recognizing the range and contexts within which we must inhabit, learn, and access knowledge in its many forms.

Mary Kawena Pukui (1949) describes kaona as the spirit within the poem, a “spirit” that is not necessarily sensed by all audience members, but one that Hawaiian audiences recognized may be a part of the poem or mele. The practice of kaona creates a complex interactive and dynamic relationship between the composer and the audience. The audience is aware of the potential for kaona to be used, as it is also considered to be a hallmark of Hawaiian aesthetics. The composer may draw from shared cultural, historical, and geographical knowledge (including the winds and rains of particular ‘āina) to make his/her kaona references through allusion or symbolism.

There is a sense of exclusivity created by kaona, one that unifies through shared knowledge, even as it is pedagogical. In this way, kaona is a responsible reading and compositional practice that demands audiences to actively ho‘okū‘auhau,⁴ or genealogize, to trace the connections between people, places, stories, proverbs, and other shared cultural imbricated knowledges and experiences. Because of the colonial context of Hawai‘i, contemporary practices of kaona, however, must also be viewed as decolonial assertions—they are both actions (doing something with a particular aim) and enactments (acting something out) reinforcing ancestral knowledge. This reinforcement of ancestral knowledge, in turn, provides a foundation to guide us within contemporary colonial contexts to overturn colonial narratives and to actualize claims to ‘āina (literally “that which feeds,” our word for land), sovereignty, and governance.

³ I use the term “Hawaiian” primarily to mean the Indigenous people of Hawai‘i, though there are also instances that I intend “Hawaiian” as a nationality (as opposed to an ethnicity) because Hawai‘i was internationally recognized as a sovereign country before the U.S.’s forced annexation in 1898. Other terms used by scholars include Kānaka ‘Ōiwi, Kānaka Maoli, and Native Hawaiian. I intend “Hawaiian Literature” in all instances to refer to the literature, both ancestral and contemporary, of Hawai‘i’s Indigenous people.

⁴ I use ho‘okū‘auhau to refer to the active and constructive process of genealogizing as opposed to the recitation of genealogies. Ho‘o- is a prefix indicating causation and transitivization, and kū‘auhau can be translated as “genealogy” or “genealogist” or “to recite genealogy.”

Contemporary Hawaiian literature is written predominantly in English that incorporates ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i (the Hawaiian language) and Hawai‘i Creole English, or “Pidgin.” The choice to write in English, ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i, Pidgin, or some combination of these languages coincides with what Walter Mignolo (2000) calls “bilanguaging,” which describes the “asymmetry of languages” within modern world systems of power. He emphasizes that bilanguaging is not bilingualism (or multilingualism) *per se*, but the conscious “redressing [of] the asymmetry of languages and denouncing the coloniality of power and knowledge” (p. 231). Chadwick Allen, in turn, uses bilanguaging to examine Indigenous-to-Indigenous juxtapositions between texts, which highlight the presence or absence of Indigenous languages and the rhetorical and aesthetic effects of this presence and absence. My own examinations of kaona in contemporary Hawaiian literature are sensitive to bilanguaging, as it is used to target primarily Hawaiian audiences and others knowledgeable of Hawaiian culture, using languages (English and Pidgin) rooted in Hawai‘i’s colonial history and present that are accessible and used by non-Hawaiians as well. As is the case within Colleps’ poem, kaona may also be made using the Hawaiian language, which is accessible only to some and emphasizes both the untranslatability of certain Hawaiian concepts and the multiple meanings that are inherent to the flexibility of ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i.

Most previous scholars of kaona, including Pukui, Kanahale, Noenoe Silva, Manu Meyer, and Noelani Arista, have focused on Hawaiian language texts and contexts, primarily from the 19th century and earlier, exclusively. I assert that, despite the different linguistic shifts and values that have been reinforced and challenged within Hawai‘i’s colonial context since the 19th century, there has been a continuum of “kaona connectivity,” the ways that the practice of kaona requires us to connect with our kūpuna, or ancestors, as well as with each other. This continuum of kaona connectivity is also an affirmation of our aesthetic sovereignty.

In this essay, I examine three contemporary literary examples of kaona connectivity. I begin by offering a reading of the kaona within Colleps’ “Kāhulu” to discuss kaona as an intellectual and aesthetic practice. I then discuss Hawaiian literary aesthetics and aesthetic sovereignty before giving close readings of a short story by John Dominis Holt and poems and visual art by Imaikalani Kalahale, who both employ kaona to connect us with the Kumulipo, a genealogical chant tracing the last two monarchs of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i to the beginning of the universe. I conclude with a discussion of the Kumulipo’s continued cultural, spiritual, and political significance and the power of our aesthetic sovereignty.

Without access to shared Hawaiian cultural and experiential knowledge and a lack of understanding Hawai‘i’s complex colonial history, one can still read Colleps’ “Kāhulu” as a poem expressing the power of our words and stories to survive through “storms/ [that] come, go, linger.” Colleps repeats the lines “our kūpuna put feathers/ on our words” in stanzas 1 and 5 (and as the opening line of the final stanza), signaling their importance to his reader. With little to no knowledge of Hawaiian culture, one can ascertain that the “feathers” placed by “our kūpuna,” or ancestors, are the very reason for this survival; just as feathers protect birds from rain, storms, and the weight and cold of water, they are shown in the poem to protect the words and stories. A

reader could be perfectly satisfied with this interpretation of just one or two layers of the poem's meaning.

To unveil more of the kaona of Colleps' poem, however, specifically the puns, metaphor, and symbolism he employs, it is imperative that I share some of the collective and experiential knowledge needed to read deeper layers of meaning. In 1896, the Republic of Hawai'i, governed by many of the same leaders who overthrew the Hawaiian Kingdom with the support of the U.S. military in 1893, passed a law that English would be the only language taught in schools. The law functioned to ban the Hawaiian language, and Hawaiian children caught speaking our native language were reprimanded and could receive corporeal punishment. By the time the law was finally repealed in 1986, the Hawaiian language was severely endangered, with very few speakers. Since then, Hawaiian immersion and other Hawaiian language programs have greatly increased the number of Hawaiian language speakers, though unfortunately, Hawaiian language speakers still comprise less than 10%⁵ of the Hawaiian population. *Kāhulu* is a relatively recent term that has been used in Hawaiian language classes to teach the language using grammatical parts of speech.⁶ Thus, only Hawaiian language students are likely to know this term, as it is not even in the Hawaiian Dictionary. By entitling his poem, "*Kāhulu*," Colleps alludes to his experience as a student of the language and, in doing so, invokes the experience of other language students, all of whom must live with the legacy of the law's colonial silencing.

Part of *kāhulu*, "*hulu*" may be translated to mean "feather" or "plumage," but figuratively can mean "esteemed" or "precious" and refer to "an esteemed older relative, as of parents or grandparents' generations." Yellow, red, black, and green *hulu* were collected from birds and used to create the featherwork symbolic of our royalty, including *mahi'ole* (helmets), *'ahu'ula* (capes and cloaks), *kāhili* (feather standards used to announce the presence of royalty), and *kā'ai* (vessels housing gods). Great value was attached to such featherwork,⁷ as not only did the feathers used require much skill to collect,⁸ they were then painstakingly woven in a tight mesh to create each royal adornment. "*Kā*" can be translated as "to strike" or may also function as a causative prefix. Thus, "*kāhulu*" can mean to either "strike with feathers" or to "create feathers,"

⁵ Bryan Kuwada (2009) contends that the percentage of Hawaiian-language speakers is currently as low as 5% of the Hawaiian population.

⁶ *Kāhulu* describes words or phrases that function as adjectives or adverbs.

⁷ *Hulu* are also used to describe the level of success and prosperity enjoyed by a person. "He manu hulu," or "a feathered bird," refers to a prosperous person, while "he manu hulu 'ole," or "a featherless bird," refers to one who is poverty-stricken.

⁸ I found two terms for bird-snaring—*kapili manu* and *lehua hāmau*. The latter term, *lehua hāmau*, or "silent lehua," is particular to the collection of the prized red and yellow feathers from 'ō'ō, mamo, and other honeycreepers and honeyeaters. The *lawai'a manu* or *kia manu* silently waited in a *lehua* tree after spreading some form of *kēpau*, or gum, such as *pīlali* (kukui tree gum) or *hū la'au* (breadfruit tree gum), on the branches and/or on the blossoms. Once a bird was snared in the gum, certain yellow or red feathers were removed from the tail, crest, or wing, and the bird was released.

very poetic ways to denote an unpoetic grammatical term such as “modifier.” Colleps extends this literal meaning to emphasize the beauty and protection given through *kāhulu* in a story. His poem expresses an aesthetic appreciation for description and detail, which he sees as making the stories strong and memorable so as to survive the storms of colonialism.

Colleps adds to the *kaona* further by likening our people to *manu*, or birds, consistent with ancestral *mo‘olelo*, or (hi)stories, and *‘ōlelo no‘eau*, or proverbs. The phrase “*Ka nui manu*,” literally, “the many birds,” is used to mean “the many people,” just as it is a common poeticism to refer to Hawaiians as “*nā mamo a Hāloa*,” or “the mamo (a Hawaiian honeycreeper) of Hāloa,” as Hāloa is considered a common ancestor to all Hawaiians. In particular, *manu* are used to connote the beauty of a person or people, as in the following *‘ōlelo no‘eau* which refer to a beautiful person: *‘Ai ka manu i luna* (The bird that eats above); *Ke kumu lehua muimuia a ka manu* (A lehua tree covered with birds); *Hā‘ale i ka wai o ka manu* (Rippling in the water of birds). Colleps’ *kaona* invokes the last of these *‘ōlelo no‘eau*, in particular, through his various images of birds and water. His *kaona* alludes to this *‘ōlelo no‘eau* and shows his admiration of our stories, our culture, our ancestors, and our people for our resilience and survivance, that despite the harsh legacies of colonialism we continue to face, we may even still take aesthetic pleasure from “ruffl[ing] our bodies in the stream.”

Hawaiian aesthetics and aesthetic sovereignty

Aesthetics is an articulation of culturally and locationally situated values that inform perceptions and experiences of beauty and pleasure. Hawaiian aesthetic systems, like other Indigenous aesthetic systems, are culturally and experientially bound and Indigenous land/water-specific. Indigenous aesthetic systems are also unique in that they are descended from ancestral aesthetic systems which have been silenced, ignored, denied, challenged, discounted, controlled, and/or made to compete within the hegemony of colonial aesthetic systems. Due to the various complex colonial situations faced by Indigenous peoples within and without our home(is)lands, aesthetic systems that are distinctly Indigenous are often met with adversity in various forms, including appropriation and exploitation, which are often purported within colonial contexts to “celebrate” the beauty of Indigenous peoples and our cultural productions. As Indigenous aesthetic systems are also “Native articulations of Native traditions,” they also “make explicit the problematic and complex aspects of Native social politics through which they work” (Barker, 2011, p. 21). In her research examining Indigenous authenticity, Joanne Barker affirms that Native traditions also serve as sites of political and social empowerment, and therefore,

Native peoples shun the notion that the relevance of their cultures and identities is merely collectable, anecdotal, or decorative. They assert traditions as the cultural beliefs and practices that they understand as uniquely their own, not as a yardstick of conformity to an authentic past but as what binds them together in relationship and responsibility to one another in the present and future. (p. 21)

As unique Indigenous traditions that continue to be used and asserted, Indigenous aesthetic systems and the aesthetic sovereignty of Indigenous peoples must be recognized, and Indigenous artist-scholars, to use Chadwick Allen's term (2012), must continue to voice the distinctiveness and continuity of our aesthetic systems, for "[t]here can be no sovereignty for Native People when there is no cultural distinctiveness" (Chi'XapKaid, 2005, p. 132). Inspired by Scott Richard Lyons' articulation of "rhetorical sovereignty" (2000), I define aesthetic sovereignty as the right and ability of peoples to define their own aesthetic standards, as well as the contexts within which those aesthetics are presented, and to determine how those aesthetic standards may fulfill and articulate the goals of their communities. Indigenous aesthetics systems are necessarily culturally bound and Indigenous place-specific, but they are also intimately intertwined with Indigenous rhetorical systems; which is to say that these are interdependent systems, with high standards of rhetoric necessarily aesthetically pleasing and high standards of aesthetics also rhetorically appealing. Chi'XapKaid (2005) emphasizes that Indigenous storytelling is an integral part of visualization process wherein people may construct a sense of reality they can trust. Those constructions of reality are necessarily built by aesthetic and rhetorical systems.

In his own work to recognize and demonstrate Trans-Indigenous aesthetic systems, Chadwick Allen (2012) calls for the development of "methodologies that enable analysis at appropriate levels of complexity" (p. 106). Through engaging "distinct and specific Indigenous aesthetic systems in the appreciation and interpretation of diverse works of Indigenous art, including written literature" (p. 106), Allen emphasizes the need for a multiplicity of contemporary Indigenous arts criticism and aesthetics to describe and demonstrate how contemporary Indigenous arts "not only convey culturally inflected meaning but also produce culturally coded aesthetic pleasure that producers and audiences recognize as 'beauty,' 'power,' and 'excellence'" (p. 104). Implicit to developing such methodologies and multiplicity of arts criticism and aesthetics, however, may also be determining language to describe beauty, power, excellence, and pleasure within Indigenous aesthetic systems using both ancestral and contemporary terms and methodologies.

Part of the challenge in discussing aesthetics in Hawaiian literature is that there are no words that would directly translate into the term, but several that could be used. "Pono" is one such term, as it has several meanings, including "goodness," "excellence," and "correctness;" and as a cultural value, pono may also indicate equality and balance. Still, pono perhaps aligns itself too closely with a sense of morality, which is also subjective, and can veer in certain instances from discussions of beauty, power, excellence and pleasure. "Nani" may also come close to describing aesthetics as it means "beauty," and the causative "ho'onani" may be translated as "to adorn or beautify," emphasizing the way in which beauty may be crafted. The 'ōlelo no'eau, Pali ke kua, mahina ke alo (Back like a cliff, face like the moon), expresses an ideal of beauty in human form. While the figurative meanings behind the expression are fairly flexible and open, most interpretations posit that one's back should be straight like a cliff and one's face, bright like the moon. Like the earlier 'ōlelo no'eau likening a handsome person to a

manu, this ‘ōlelo no‘eau privileges mainly visuality, though “nani” and “ho‘onani” may also privilege auricularity. But Hawaiian aesthetics have been and may be articulated beyond the visual or heard image to include other physical senses of beauty and pleasure.

Hawaiian artist-scholars have recently called for aesthetics systems that describe beauty and pleasure in terms of taste to emphasize the aesthetic subjectivities of audiences and artists, but also aesthetic multiplicity, as taste may both connote a preference subject to particular values inherited and shaped by genealogies, even as there may be a favoring of more than one aesthetic system. Both Māhealani Dudoit (1998) and ku‘ualoha ho‘omanawanui (2012) draw from Imaikalani Kalahale (cited in Dudoit) who describes Hawaiian aesthetics as the ‘ono, or deliciousness, of an artwork. Inspired by the ‘ōlelo no‘eau, Ka li‘u o ka pa‘akai (well-seasoned with salt), ho‘omanawanui uses “li‘u,” a word that means both well-seasoned and skillful, to describe a literary aesthetic standard, emphasizing that li‘u is achieved through displays of meiwī mo‘okalaleo,⁹ or Hawaiian oral, literary, and rhetorical devices.

Beyond sight, hearing, and taste, we may also think of aesthetics in terms of ‘ala, or fragrance. He inoa ‘ala (a fragrant name) is used to describe an ali‘i, or chief, whose good deeds may continue to be felt and remembered. Smells are very central to descriptions of goodness or evil throughout the Pacific and are often thought of as signs or warnings. While also aesthetically subjective, as something considered fragrant to one may be considered too strong or even repulsive to another, smell can be useful to articulate aesthetics in terms of legacy or memory, as they often indicate presence despite absence or invisibility. Vicente Diaz (2012) asserts that because “smells are also powerful—some say the most powerful—triggers of memory,” that they should be examined as “a complex discursive process and product with its own complicated sets of relationships to history” (p. 326). Consequently, thinking of aesthetics as the ‘ala of a literary text allows us to make textual, cultural, and historical connections and associations grounded in legacy and memory, to actively genealogize layers of meaning across contexts—and to think of these intellectual challenges as pleasurable.

Beyond offering a term for aesthetics, however, we must discuss how we culturally and corporeally perceive and judge the nani, ‘ono, li‘u, or ‘ala of a literary work. No matter which sense is privileged, each approach describing Hawaiian aesthetics articulates not just beauty, but also bodily and intellectual pleasure, that should be savored, appreciated, and easily remembered. Shared cultural experience and knowledge is key here and collectively validated. In this way, Hawaiian aesthetics, like other Indigenous aesthetics, carries within it a sense of exclusivity that is unifying, even as it allows for multiperspectivist engagement through aesthetic subjectivities.

Perhaps most important to all discussions of Hawaiian aesthetics, however, is the emphasis that is placed on function. The ‘ōlelo no‘eau He u‘i lolena kū i ki‘ona (a lazy beauty is fit for the dung hill) expresses that the beautiful must also adhere to community values, sharing

⁹ These terms are relatively recent terms created by the Komike Hua‘ōlelo (Hawaiian Lexicon Committee), who publish *Māmaka Kaiao: A Modern Hawaiian Vocabulary*. The Komike Hua‘ōlelo was formed in 1987 “to create words for concepts and material culture unknown in traditional Hawaii” (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011). The most recent edition of *Māmaka Kaiao* was published in September 2003.

in the work, and being useful, practical. Māhealani Dudoit (1998) asserts that Hawaiian aesthetics were never purely ornamental; rather,

while aesthetic quality was most decidedly important to ancient Hawaiian sensibilities, it always functioned in conjunction with a practical, spiritual, or symbolic capacity, whether secular or sacred.... Individuals were recognized as being good at hana no‘eau, but their activities were appreciated for their functional, as well as aesthetic strengths. (p. 23)

Aside from perhaps a function of content, embellishing rhetorical appeals to the political or historical, our aesthetic systems also functioned on a very practical level to teach, transmit, and commit sacred (hi)stories, songs, and chants to memory, to actively construct meaning-making with audiences, and to incite pleasure through sensory appeals and intellectual challenges. Within contemporary colonial contexts, Dudoit further asserts Hawaiian aesthetics systems function as decolonial action through which Hawaiians may also maintain our political and cultural sovereignty. By continuing to develop our own standards of beauty and pleasure, Dudoit argues that the American aesthetic systems’ colonizing forces will weaken their stronghold on our people. This led her to found *‘ōiwi: a native hawaiian journal* in 1998 as a space for free Hawaiian expression wherein these discussions and productions of aesthetics could happen. Three decades earlier, John Dominis Holt (1965) similarly emphasizes aesthetic sovereignty when he describes the experience of being Hawaiian, lived cultural experience, as connected to aesthetic experience:

I cannot be a Hawaiian politically or nationally, for there is no longer a Hawaiian nation. I am a Hawaiian in sentiment, perhaps in a sense aesthetically, for I am governed in my feelings as a Hawaiian by an ideal, an image, a collection of feelings fused by the connecting links of elements that go deep into the past ... (p. 13)

Given his own genealogical connections to Queen Lili‘uokalani, the last reigning monarch of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i, there is a deep sadness and heaviness in his not being able to be a Hawaiian politically or nationally without a Hawaiian nation. Without a nation, however, he shares that he remains Hawaiian “in sentiment, perhaps in a sense aesthetically” to underscore his preferences for beauty and pleasure that are connected to and have been shaped by Hawaiian ancestors and elements “that go deep into the past.” When he writes that he is “filled with an aesthetic pleasure when I think of tall chiefs wearing feather covered helmets; great cloaks and capes--again, of feathers--draped across their shoulders, or covering the full length of their frames as they walked across the land” (p. 16), his choice of imagery tells of how his aesthetic sense has been shaped, not just by culture and history, but also by such symbols of Hawaiian governance and sovereignty. Despite living in a Hawai‘i that has been forced under American colonial rule, Holt affirms that our aesthetic sovereignty continues, just as our connections to our sovereign ancestors remain strong.

Kaona connections to the Kumulipo in contemporary Hawaiian literature

The practice of kaona fosters multiperspectivist engagement and active meaning-making between the artist-scholar and audiences, such that audiences are integral to the practice. Thus, while kaona may be intended by the artist-scholar at the time of composition, it is incomplete if not received or interpreted by audiences. Moreover, because language and meaning are never completely under the control of the composer (and because acts of creation tend to make subconscious and ancestral interventions transparent), I assert that the practice of kaona can transcend authorial intention, as audiences may detect and read kaona that was not intended, but is there nevertheless and in need of audiences to reveal it. Of course, this allows for false, ill-informed, and often colonial readings and misinterpretations, but such misreadings enable and encourage active engagement through paio (debate) or ho‘opāpā (a contest of wits), pedagogical practices designed to challenge and further the intellects of the opposing sides, as well as of their audiences.

Returning to the ‘ōlelo no‘eau, “Pali ke kua, mahina ke alo (The back is a cliff, the face a moon),” we can also read ke kua (the back) and ke alo (the face or front) as a duality that articulates meaning within kaona. The front, which must shine like the moon, is the surfaced or literal meaning that most audiences can enjoy and read. The back, however, which must hold up the entire structure of kaona with the straightness and strength of a cliff, are the layers of figurative meaning lying under the literal. Some audiences may be content to see only the moon for its beauty and not know the cliff even exists, while others may sense the cliff is there but still not see it, while still others may follow the moonlight toward the cliff’s outline and eventually see its shadows, ridges, and geological layers. In this way, the same instance of kaona from a work of literature may appear more hidden to some than others, while the space within which it has been presented may appear more open or obvious to some than others. I assert that, because of this range of knowledges and experiences, that kaona, despite hinging upon a concealment or veiling of meaning, can appear to be more overt, a direct reference, as opposed to an inferred or veiled reference, because direct references are often only the beginning point of engaging with the meaning-making practice of kaona. That is, as a reading or pedagogical practice, kaona also requires the reader to engage with the experiential or cultural knowledges behind a direct reference that may not be readily accessible to non-Hawaiians or those unfamiliar with the subject at hand. For example, just because one may recognize a direct reference to the Kumulipo in the works of John Dominis Holt and Imaikalani Kalahale, one may not necessarily understand why the Kumulipo is referenced, how the Kumulipo is working intertextually with a contemporary work in a given context, or how knowledge and experience with the Kumulipo is being used aesthetically and rhetorically to persuade and/or urge action. These layers of meaning are left for audiences to consider and decipher, or not as the case may be, as there will be audiences who choose not to engage in this practice, or are unaware they are even being challenged intellectually in this way.

To examine how the kaona within the works of Holt and Kalahale establishes connections with the Kumulipo, I must first offer some background. The Kumulipo¹⁰ is arguably the most important literary work in the Native Hawaiian canon and among the most significant contributions to world Indigenous literature. A 2,108-line genealogical chant, the Kumulipo gives an evolutionary account that traces the beginnings of the Hawaiian concept of the universe, detailing the evolution of plants and animals, to the birth of kanaka (humans). Human genealogies descend from those of plants and animals, which, in turn, descend from the earliest energies of Pō, the creative darkness that is first to give birth.

The Kumulipo, however, is more than an account of evolution or creation, but also the genealogical chant of the last two monarchs of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i, Kalākaua and Lili‘uokalani, and stands as a considerable testament to the deep history and legitimacy of Hawaiian sovereignty and governance. The Kumulipo was first published in its entirety, in Hawaiian, in 1889, during the reign of Kalākaua, and then translated into English by Queen Lili‘uokalani in 1895, an endeavor she began while imprisoned by the Provisional Government for misprision of treason, just two years after her accusers and captors committed treason against the Kingdom of Hawai‘i with U.S. military backing. The Queen’s translation was published by Boston’s Lee & Shepard in 1897, but went out of print within a year, coinciding with the U.S.’s forced annexation of Hawai‘i, despite the failure of a treaty of annexation, through joint-resolution. As a genealogy of Hawaiian governance and sovereignty, the Kumulipo is often referenced in our contemporary literature through kaona, though these instances go beyond intertextuality, or locating contemporary works within a distinctly Hawaiian canon, to also articulate the Kumulipo as a political claim to land and sovereignty that maintains and is informed by our ancestral connections.

The Kumulipo is divided into sixteen wā, or eras of creation, with the first seven wā describing the time of Pō (darkness, night) when the heaven and earth are created, as well as the plants, animals and gods, and the final nine wā occurring in the time of Ao (light, day) when human genealogies spring from plants, animals, and godly genealogies. Ao and Pō are among several unopposing dualisms or “complementary pairs”¹¹ expressed throughout the Kumulipo as

¹⁰ I use the Kumulipo here (without italics to indicate the title of a work) to emphasize the sacredness of the text, similar to the Bible, the Qur’an, and the Bhagavad Gita. Like these other sacred texts, the Kumulipo may also be read as a historical record with different recognized versions. The title of Kalākaua’s version of the Kumulipo begins with He Pule Ho’ola’a Ali’i, He Kumulipo ... (A Prayer to Consecrate Ali’i, A Kumulipo...) to recognize that it is just one version of this genealogy and sacred text. Lili‘uokalani’s translation is of Kalākaua’s version of the Kumulipo and is entitled *An Account of the Creation of the World According to Hawaiian Tradition*. I use *the* Kumulipo (as opposed to *a* Kumulipo) throughout this essay to speak generally and to be more inclusive of all versions, but to also stress its authority as a sacred Hawaiian text. I call attention to Kalākaua’s version and Lili‘uokalani’s translation in particular because of their political importance and use to convey the legitimacy of both the Kalākaua dynasty and Hawaiian sovereignty and governance.

¹¹ Noenoe Silva notes that the term “dualism” connotes “the notion of one thing split into two” or “the double nature of something,” neither of which applies in the case of the paired forces within the Kumulipo. Instead, she suggests the term “complementary pairs” (pers. comm.).

a kind of paired balance or pono—Kāne/Wahine (Male/Female); Akua/Kanaka (God/Human); and ‘Āina/Moana (Land/Ocean). This relationship of pono, rather than a Manichean structural hierarchy indicating dominance of one side of the pair over the other, emphasizes how both sides of each duality are necessary and equally important in terms of their roles and functions.

Kaona to the Kumulipo in John Dominis Holt’s “Princess of the Night Rides” (1977)

Born in 1919, John Dominis Holt was descended from Kūho‘oki‘eki‘e through his maternal lineage and Ha‘ole through his paternal lineage. Both lines connect him genealogically to Kamehameha I. In addition, John Dominis, the husband of Queen Lili‘uokalani and his namesake, was Holt’s grand-uncle. Holt’s creative and scholarly work reflect his ali‘i lineage as afforded him through his family and their intimate stories of Kalākaua, Lili‘uokalani, Ka‘iulani and other ali‘i. Holt’s ali‘i stature is reflected in his dedication to publishing Hawaiian literature and arts through his Topgallant Press and Ku Pa‘a Press when other publishing venues for Hawaiian writers were virtually non-existent. To his tremendous credit, Holt published 29 books under his Topgallant Press and 14 books under Ku Pa‘a Press between 1965 and 1993, when he passed away at the age of 73. While not all of Holt’s publications are by Hawaiian authors, the majority of them are, with the rest of the works focused in some way on Hawai‘i. Holt is also noted for several other self-publications, many of which also emphasize the importance of genealogy, including a historiography, *The Hawaiian Monarchy* (1971); his novel, *Waimea Summer* (1976); a short story collection, *Princess of the Night Rides* (1977); *Hanai, A Poem for Queen Lili‘uokalani* (1986) and his memoir, *Recollections: Memoirs of John Dominis Holt 1919-1933* (1993).

Holt started Topgallant Press in 1965¹² by publishing *On Being Hawaiian*, which featured his pivotal essay of the same title. “On Being Hawaiian”¹³ characterizes a colonized Hawaiian identity as constructed out of deep and irrevocable loss of country, of family and loved ones; of culture, language, and history; and amidst ongoing colonial hegemony and racism designed to further marginalize and dispossess. Still, Holt asserts that refuge can be found in connections with our kūpuna and ‘āina, our land:

¹² John Dominis Holt established two presses in Hawai‘i: Topgallant Press in 1964 and Ku Pa‘a Press in the early 1990s. Among the books published by Holt’s press was Rubellite Kawena Johnson’s translation of the Kumulipo in 1981.

¹³ In his Introduction (1995), Holt recalls that “On Being Hawaiian” came out of him “like an anguished child. The substance of it had lain like a restive fetus overly anxious to be born after a long period of gestation” (7) in 1964, and that it was originally a response to “an offensive item” reinforcing racist stereotypes of Hawaiians in the *Honolulu Advertiser* (one of a series he had read throughout his life). Upon writing the essay, he submitted it to the *Honolulu Advertiser* for publication; however, the essay was returned to him and denied publication. Together with supportive friends, Holt later self-published this important piece in 1965.

We are links to the ancients; connected by inheritance to their mana, their wisdom, their superb appreciation of what it is to be human. This is the foundation of the aloha spirit. It comes from many things, from knowing what it is to care, to truly care about other people. To understand the value of loving what is in nature: living with it in a balance of coexistence; respecting all things of the earth, including rocks and dirt as living things related somehow through a cosmic connection to ourselves. (p. 9)

Though Holt does not explicitly name the Kumulipo here (he does elsewhere in the essay, however), his affirmation of our “cosmic connection” to “all things of the earth” is likely informed by this genealogy.

The title story of the collection *Princess of the Night Rides* (1977), featuring Princess Kaʻiulani as the protagonist, similarly emphasizes genealogy through kaona connections to the Kumulipo. The story takes place in Honolulu and the Nuʻuanu valley on the island of Oʻahu. Kaʻiulani is 23 years old in 1898, the year that Hawaiʻi was annexed to the United States despite the efforts of the deposed Queen Liliʻuokalani and over 90% of Hawaiian citizens who signed a petition against Annexation. Hawaiʻi was annexed to the U.S. on August 12, 1898. Princess Kaʻiulani, who was in Hawaiʻi during Annexation, died just seven months later in March 1899.

The story begins by describing Kaʻiulani’s night rides on her horse, Damozel. Though grief-stricken from the loss of her country to American Annexation, she feels “a powerful sense of freedom” riding through an “unrevealing darkness,” foreshadowing the Princess’ death by having her find comfort in the darkness, but also aligning the Princess with the creative darkness from which the universe was created, according to the Kumulipo. As the story progresses, the Princess is shown to be riding at night, also because after “spending seven long years in the wintry temperatures of Northern Europe, she found the languid tropical air of her island birthplace almost intolerable. It was a luxurious joy to ride in the sunless dark of the night” (p. 37). At the time of her death, Kaʻiulani had only been in Hawaiʻi for a little over a year after returning from seven years in Europe. Sadly, what became Kaʻiulani’s exile in Europe, coupled with the loss of Hawaiʻi as a nation, leads to an exile in her own homeland. In the story, she writes in a letter to the “ex-Queen”: “I guess I am no longer a native Hawaiian in this respect; my body is at odds with the warm air of the tropics” (Holt, 1977, p. 38). Her own body’s discomfort at home is symbolic of this exile, while her feelings of no longer being a “native Hawaiian” illustrate her feelings of displacement and dispossession, as her birthright and her very identity have been stripped from her.

Holt further emphasizes this theme of exile in another letter to “her friend, the Marquise de Crecy,” wherein Kaʻiulani describes how she feels ill-treated, even mocked, by the Americans following Annexation:

‘... some Americans came to my house and knocked rather violently at the door, and when they had stated their cause, they wished to know if it would be permissible for the EX-princess to have her picture taken with them.... They have taken everything away from us and it seems there is left but little, and that little

our very life itself. We live now in such a semi-retired way that people wonder if we even exist anymore. I, too, wonder, and to what purpose?’ (p. 40)

Here, Holt nearly reproduces a letter written by Ka‘iulani word for word, though the original was intended for the Queen during her 1898 trip to Washington D.C. to regain the Crown lands after Annexation. The Marquise is a fictional character, perhaps used to show Ka‘iulani’s worldliness, as well as how accepted Ka‘iulani was among the European aristocracy. In using the letter, Holt highlights how cruelly she has been turned into a fetishized colonial object, as well as the tremendous grief of Ka‘iulani as an ali‘i raised since birth to lead and care for her people, who are now impoverished since the Overthrow five years earlier. As shown in her letter, Ka‘iulani questions her very existence, as her purpose had always been defined as an ali‘i. Thus, her grief from exile, loss of country, and the suffering of her people, lead her to an existential crisis.

The story fictionalizes Ka‘iulani’s final night ride, when she travels farther than usual, up into Nu‘uanu Valley. On this ride, Ka‘iulani delights in the change of rains and the fragrance of the ‘āina, or land, in its abundance:

At Mamalahoa¹⁴ the frizzy mist turned into rain—a heavy, cold, upper Nuuanu rain... How luxuriant were the smells here! Wild nature—unspoiled, unexpurgated; budding and leafing, flowering and ripening; decaying leaves, twigs, blooms in brown masses formed thick layers of compost under shrub and tree; kukui trees and ferns—pulu, pala palai, ho-io made the more fragrant with the fall of rain—grew in profusion here. (p. 55)

Here, Holt uses imagery of the ‘āina to emphasize how death nourishes life, allowing the ancient to live on in the modern, in much the same way that our ancestors live on through us. In particular, ferns such as the pulu, or hāpu‘u pulu, used for healing, the palapalai, and the hō‘i‘o, are mentioned to collectively symbolize ancestry and healing. Ka‘iulani notes how the ferns “were another link with the deep past. They had been celebrated, time and again, in the ancient mele, the epics of classic Hawai‘i which were preserved by the people remembering them word for word” (p. 55). A kaona connection to the Kumulipo, ferns are listed in the first wā and come right after the first life on earth, the coral polyps, mollusks and worms. This is a place of prominence recognizing the ferns as being amongst the oldest life on the ‘āina.

Following intense displays of sorrow and anger while on her ride, Ka‘iulani comes face-to-face with Nā Huaka‘i Pō, the Night Marchers, a ghostly procession of ancestors:

Pale yellow circles of light were approaching, the flickering kukui torches reflecting the procession at the head of which were the proud chiefs of old in splendid cloaks of yellow and red feathers. Alongside them their massive chiefesses, adorned with golden feather leis and other exquisite personal decoration. (p. 56)

¹⁴ I privilege the spelling authors use in their writing and their choices to use or not use Hawaiian diacritical marks in all instances.

Kaʻiulani bears witness to the aliʻi procession, and as such, is in danger of being punished by the guards of the aliʻi should she not be able to demonstrate her mana as an aliʻi herself. She knows that to save herself she must identify herself in the traditional Hawaiian way—that is, she must chant her moʻokūʻauhau:

Unexpectedly, two chiefs broke the ranks of the procession and stood silently confronting her.... ‘Keiki hua owau—Kepookalani, Aikanaka, Kamanawa, Kamaekalani, Kameeiamoku, Kamehameha nui—’ she shouted all the names of ancestors she could remember. One name came through the mist of time ... ‘Kaneikailani’ she said with authoritative firmness. (p. 57)

Upon demonstrating her descent from Oʻahu aliʻi, the Princess is recognized and pardoned from death, said to be the punishment for daring to gaze upon the aliʻi marchers. This encounter is the climax of the story’s development. Knowledge of her ancestors and her genealogy not only saves the Princess from the Marchers, it also seems to save her from her own melancholy and anger. Being recognized as an aliʻi by her kūpuna and witnessing firsthand the way that Hawaiʻi’s aliʻi persist as part of the ʻāina, as its caretakers, allows Kaʻiulani to see herself as belonging to the Hawaiʻi she once feared was lost to her and her people. Her encounter reassures her that foreign control could never erase the Hawaiian from Hawaiʻi.

Following this encounter, Princess Kaʻiulani heals through reconnecting with the Kumulipo. She whispers “‘How far I’ve gone from all of my birthright. How far—I ka puolo waimaka o ka onihi ke kulu iho nei, e.’ My eyes a bundle of tears full to overflowing” (p. 58). She then reaffirms her descent from Papa, the Hawaiian Earth Mother, and Wākea, the Hawaiian Sky Father, who are both listed in the Kumulipo: “Papa and Wakea my progenitors I am here—I am yours,” after which Kaʻiulani feels “a glorious surge of freedom—of being at peace with everything” (p. 59). That she says this while in Nuʻuanu, where Papa and Wākea once lived according to various (hi)stories, underscores the power of this ancestral reconnection. On her way home she recalls a few of the beginning lines from the Kumulipo and chants in English first and then Hawaiian: “Darkness of the sun, darkness of the night. Nothing but night. O ka lipo o ka la, ka lipo o ka po—po wali [sic] ho-i” (p. 59). Simultaneously affirmation of Kaʻiulani’s and Hawaiʻi’s claims to sovereignty and nationhood, Kaʻiulani’s knowledge of her genealogy, the Kumulipo, is what ultimately guides and saves her. In emphasizing this healing through genealogy, Holt, in turn, asks us, as contemporary Hawaiians to follow the Princess’ example, to take pride in the great knowledge of our people and to know our continued belonging to this land for generations.

Princess Kaʻiulani was greatly loved. During a time when aliʻi children were rare due to the ravages of foreign diseases, she was the bright hope for continued Hawaiian governance within our homeland. Lovingly calling her Kamalii Kaiulani, or Royal Child, the Hawaiian newspapers of the time reported consistently on Kaʻiulani, even while she was abroad in Europe. Upon her return to Hawaiʻi, Ka Lei Rose o Hawaii noted the crowd of 400 people, including “na Luna Aupuni o na aupuni nui, na luna aupuni, na poe koikoi a me na hoaloha a lehulehu wale”

(the leaders of the great nations, the national leaders and numerous friends) who were there to welcome Kaʻiulani despite “ka nui o ka ua a me ka nui o ka pilikia no ka pikalekale o na alanui i ka lepo” or “the heavy rain and the trouble caused by the muddiness of the dirt roads” (Ka Lei Rose o Hawaiʻi, 1898). As mentioned earlier, Kaʻiulani fell ill and died a little over a year after returning to Hawaiʻi. Though Kaʻiulani died in her home at Ainalahou, she fell ill weeks earlier while visiting the Parker family in Waimea on Hawaiʻi. Her “omaimai” or “chronic illness” was reported as “ka maʻi rumatika ehaeha loa” or “inflammatory rheumatism” in Ka Makaaianana on February 19, 1899. Later, after Kaʻiulani’s death, on March 18, 1899, Ka Lahui Hawaii reported on her funeral under the headline “Ka Hoolewa o ke Kamaʻlii Vitoria Kaiulani, Kumakena ka Lahui Hawaii—Olo ka Pihe mai o a o” (“The Ascent of the Royal Child Victoria Kaʻiulani to Heaven, The Hawaiian Nation Mourns—The Lamentation Resounds Everywhere”) in great detail, including noted family members and officials in attendance, the order of the procession carrying Kaʻiulani to rest at Mauna Ala, the Royal Mausoleum, and their traditional mourning attire, her burial in the Kalākaua crypt, and the gifts of kahili given by Kamaʻlii Kawanānakoā.¹⁵ Ka Lahui described the tremendous grief of those in attendance:

Ua puka mai na paa kahili a pau iwaho a mahope mai ka pahu kupapau e halihaliia ana e na hapai pahu. Me ke akahale ka hapaia ana a hiki i ke kau ana i luna o ke kaa, a o ia no hoi ka wa i olo ai ka pihe o na leo kumakena. Auwe! He ku i ka walohia a me ka makena maoli.

All of the kahili bearers came outside and afterward there was the coffin, which was carried by the pall bearers. They carried the coffin carefully until they placed the coffin atop the carriage, and indeed, during this time, the lamentations of the mournful voices resounded. Auē! It was truly moving and mournful. (my translation)

Arnold Hōkūlani Requilman notes that over 20,000 “weeping Hawaiians, young and old, lined the sidewalks to watch the procession’s movement” (p. 200) and that “Hawaiʻi Ponoʻī,” the Hawaiian national anthem was played after her vault had been sealed. These accounts demonstrate the people’s love for Kaʻiulani, as well as how she was upheld as the future of the Hawaiian nation. Because her death came so soon after Annexation, by mourning Kamaliʻi Kaʻiulani, our people were also mourning the loss of our country.

Despite common knowledge of Kaʻiulani’s illness after Waimea, Holt gives Kaʻiulani a new death, showing her sickness beginning after her encounter with the Huakaʻi Pō in Nuʻuanu, and her death following just two weeks later:

It was almost dawn. ... She was drenched and tired—so was the mare—from the long ride, the exposure to the rains. A chill and fever had already begun to exact a

¹⁵ This is consistent with the spelling in *Ka Lahui Hawaii*.

toll on her strong young body. She had fallen on the verandah near the heavy front doors. ... In two week's time, she would be dead. (Holt, 1977, p. 59)

While somewhat of an abrupt ending, Holt chooses to give Ka'iulani a sense of returning and belonging to the 'āina and the kūpuna before her death. Tonally this provides mournful reassurance that Ka'iulani lives on alongside our ancestors. Her journey, as Holt has written it, stands as a model for all Hawaiians to be reassured of our own belonging in life and death to our homeland, that the mana of our deep history lives on here, and that our ancestors supercede our relatively recent colonial occupation by the United States—all important lessons of the Kumulipo.

Kaona to Kumulipo in Imaikalani Kalahele's Kalahele (2002)

Born in 1950 and still creating, Imaikalani Kalahele is a poet, playwright, performance and visual artist, musician and activist who, like Holt, has also dedicated much of his life to organizing exhibitions and readings for the Hawaiian arts and literary community. Also like Holt, much of Kalahele's work demonstrates kaona connections with the Kumulipo. In 2005, Kalahele created an 18-foot mural,¹⁶ "Kumulipo and Pō'ele'ele," using felt markers as a medium. He describes the mural as depicting the first lines of the first wā, where Kumulipo, a male darkness, and Pō'ele'ele, a female darkness, are born: "For me, that's what this [mural] is. It's that time when you just come out of Pō when things are out of the darkness, the primal" (Kalahele). His poetry collection, *Kalahele*, published in 2002 by Kalamaku Press, carries similar themes of ancestral cultural return with several black and white drawings and visual poems, or calligrams, employing kaona to the Kumulipo.

Among the first poems in the collection is "The Source," a poem of eight one-line stanzas that are centered and arranged on the page so as to suggest a woman's kohe or vagina. The Kumulipo emphasizes the duality and pono between male and female as a necessary part of creation, what is emphasized in all genealogies; the poem's shape underscores the role of human sexuality as a part of the creation that occurs within all elements of the natural world and that procreation mirrors godly creation. The kohe is the gateway to Ao. The poem, however, more specifically references the Kumulipo through its title and the repetition of the words "source" and "revolve" or "kumu" and "huli." The "source" is emphasized within the poem as the beginning, the origin of creation, as is that political "revolution," should come "from the source," be guided by it, and driven by our ancestral connection. The poem illustrates that "secret" knowledge, perhaps a reference to kaona, is part of the journey of revolution, knowledge that must pass "for capable hands" "from capable hands" "to capable hands." The "capable hands" point to the many generations that both inspire and work to preserve this knowledge. The

¹⁶ Kalahele's mural was part of an exhibition of the Bishop Museum, "Kū i Ka Ni'o: Celebrating Six Hawaiian Master Artists," in 2006 (Bishop Museum). The mural is now a part of Kalahele's personal collection.

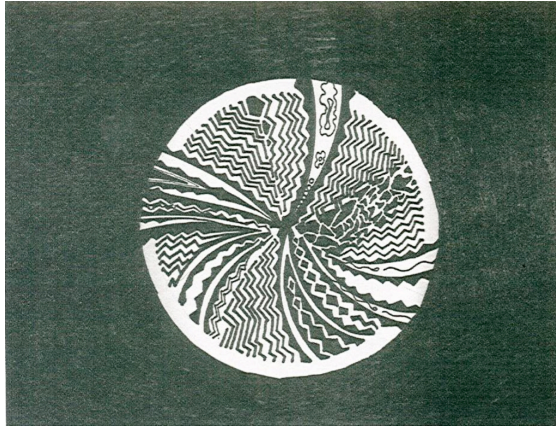
repetition of “revolve” references the “huli” that occurs in the very first lines of the Kumulipo: “O ke au i kahuli wela ka honua/ O ke au i kahuli lole ka lani” (Kalākaua, 1972, p. 187) or “At the time that turned the heat of the earth, / At the time when the heavens turned and changed” (Lili‘uokalani, 1978, p. 2). The Kumulipo teaches that “huli,” turning or revolving, is a part of the creative process, that change and upheaval are necessary for creation to occur.¹⁷ Thus, the repetition of “revolve” also serves to connote colonial resistance.

Kalahele further emphasizes our connection to the beginnings of pō in the Kumulipo in the poem “Manifesto.” Using short, centered lines, Kalahele recognizes the ‘āina as “the source/of/my origins” as it “lie[s]/ beneath [my] feet,” while the very “breath/ in [my] chest/ originated/ in Pō” (2002, p. 63), which underscores one of the primary lessons of the Kumulipo—that of our intimate connection to the universe. As descendants of the beginnings of the universe, the beginnings of the universe live on within us. This spiritual realization of interconnectedness is later shown to inform Kalahele’s political and spiritual consciousness, which “infest[s]/ [his] veins//.” Kalahele asserts that while a sense of nationalism is “new,” as Hawaiian nationalism was born out of a space of colonial contention largely in the nineteenth century, the spiritualism that also informs his political consciousness is “old,” again highlighting ancestral connection. Together, his nationalism and spiritualism urge him in the final lines “to make wrong/ right/ now//.” These last three lines can be read in two ways: 1) that there is a need for “mak[ing] wrong” or resistance immediately, or “right/ now”; and 2) that there is a need to “make” the “wrong” of colonial injustice “right” in the present. Either meaning explains what is being declared through Kalahele’s “Manifesto,” that the political and the spiritual are necessarily intertwined and, together, urge us as contemporary Hawaiians toward a resistance against colonialism through an ancestral connection and return.

Kalahele’s “Inaspace” series concludes the collection and features a succession of six black/white drawings depicting many of the same dualisms present in the Kumulipo—light and dark, male and female. All of the drawings depict stylized celestial orbs rendered with traditional kapa and kākau or tattoo designs, many of which are tied to genealogies. In “Inaspace 1,” there is a piko, a center, from which traditional designs connoting genealogies radiate forth. Movement and turning are depicted here, again harkening to the “huli” in the first few lines of the Kumulipo.

¹⁷ In her translation of the Kumulipo (1981), Rubellite Kawena Johnson notes that the universe emerges out of the sky turning against the earth, which she asserts articulates a Hawaiian philosophy of time:

When the cosmic night (Po) of creation forms in the Kumulipo, the universe begins in motion. This motion is a movement (kahuli) of the sky (lani) against the earth (honua). The relative movement or rotation of the sky against the earth begins at a turning point in space (au). It begins also in time (au) conceived as a flow or current (au) around the earth. Thus, in one term, *au*, the concept of time flowing through space as a current combines all three concepts: time, space, and the flow (au) of both. The direction of this flow is a revolving or turning over, under and around (kahuli) the earth in a cosmic swirl of space. (p. 21)

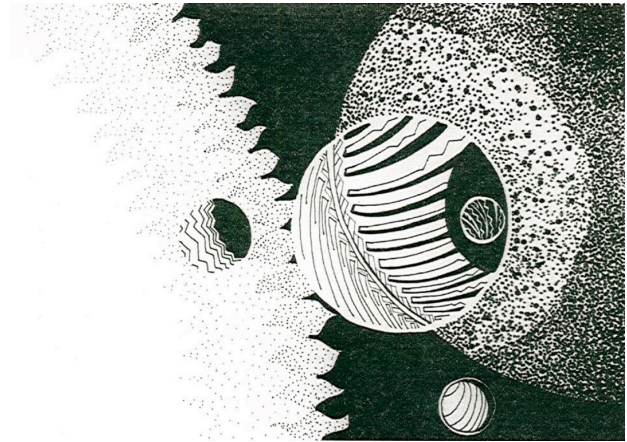


Inaspace 1

In “Inaspace 2” and “Inaspace 5,” the orbs also seem planetary and are placed to indicate movement ambiguously between both darkness and light, without giving a sense of direction, emphasizing the movement between the time of the gods (pō) and the time of humankind (ao) and perhaps signifying Kalahēle’s call for an ancestral return/connection in the present.

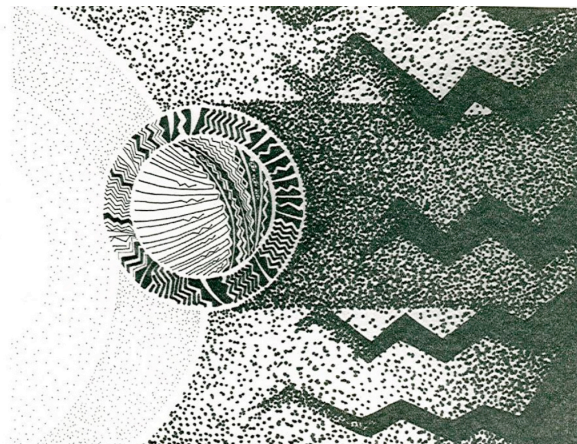


Inaspace 2

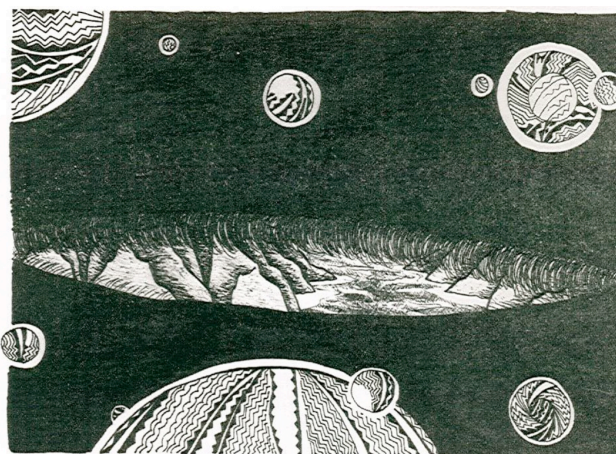


Inaspace 5

In slight contrast, “Inaspace 3” and “Inaspace 4” resemble human reproduction through the central image of an orb within an orb (like a fertilized egg) presented as moving from darkness to light.


Inaspace 3

Inaspace 4

The series ends with “Inaspace 6,” whose central image is almond-shaped and oblong and set against a backdrop that is mainly black except for several smaller orbs and parts of larger ones. One orb is drawn to supercede the frame, emphasizing how creation cannot be contained. Rather than featuring genealogical designs as in the other orbs of the series, the oblong almond-shape shows the image of a river valley, reminiscent of the valleys formed by the Ko‘olau Mountains. The effect of the shape and its image against the dark backdrop is that it could represent either negative or positive space, with the negative space illustrating a crater lit from within, and the positive space illustrating a solid tuberos mass floating through darkness amongst the orbs.


Inaspace 6

That the series is called “Inaspace” highlights the Kumulipo’s influence on Kalahale and the spiritual and political lesson of our interconnection with our land, our ancestors, and the universe, as the Kumulipo also emphasizes how within each of us is a universe, the same beginnings of creation, as well as the ability to procreate.

Conclusion

As an intellectual practice we have continued despite colonially enforced linguistic and literary shifts, I contend that contemporary kaona, which continues to be upheld as an aesthetic hallmark within our literature, must be seen and read as a decolonial assertion of Hawaiian aesthetic sovereignty. Meaning and the pleasure produced and appreciated through kaona connections with our ancestral (hi)stories are dependent on dynamic connections between the artist-scholar and audiences and, importantly, between the ancestral and the contemporary. Because the Kumulipo is a classical and sacred text of Hawaiian literature, contemporary kaona references to the Kumulipo also work to situate contemporary works within a continuum of Hawaiian literature. However, more than defining a literary tradition and asserting literary nationalism, kaona may also reference the peoples' cultural memory associated with its subject, as well as the history associated with the subject's production. Thus, when kaona connections are made to the Kumulipo, its content, but also its production history may be simultaneously invoked. Indeed, because of the Kumulipo's association with Hawai'i's last two monarchs during our final years as an independent nation, the Kumulipo has also come to symbolize Hawaiian sovereignty. By recounting 800 generations of ali'i in the final nine wā, the Kumulipo also firmly underscores the validity and long history of sovereignty and native governance in Hawai'i. American colonial occupation, which has only amounted to four or five generations, has been justified by emphasizing our ineptitude to govern and support ourselves. The Kumulipo completely discredits these claims and American colonial rule in Hawai'i.

Ultimately, the Kumulipo, the practice of kaona, and our Hawaiian aesthetics systems stand as proof of our proud heritage, the great intellectualism of our people, and our right and responsibility to maintain all forms of our sovereignty and care for our lands and ocean—their lessons for us as Hawaiians are infinite. And, as our contemporary writers remind us, we must continue to open ourselves such lessons as they have been passed down to us from our ancestors; it is their wisdom, and our insistence to follow in their stead that must continue to guide us.

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