

Kapaemahu: Toward Story Sovereignty of a Hawaiian Tradition of Healing and Gender Diversity

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On Honolulu's famed Waikīkī Beach, in the busy stretch between the Duke Kahanamoku statue and the police station, stand four basalt boulders atop a stone platform surrounded by a wrought iron fence.¹ Known originally in English as "The Wizard Stones Called Ka-Pae-Mahu" (Boyd 1906a) and in Hawaiian as "Ka Pohaku Kahuna Kapaema-hu" (*Ka Nupepa Kuokoa* 1907), this City and County of Honolulu monument is passed by millions of tourists and locals every year. Yet despite the plaques adjacent to the stones and the descriptions found in guidebooks and online, the history and cultural significance of this wahi pana (sacred or storied place) remains largely unknown to the general public and scholars alike.

According to a traditional moolelo (legend, story, or history), the stones carry the living spirits of four mahu—individuals of dual male and female spirit—who first brought the healing arts from Tahiti to Hawai'i. Over time, however, this account has been selectively altered to minimize its connection to gender diversity and the relationship between spiritual duality and healing.

Why, and how, was the "mahu" taken out of the moolelo of Kapaemahu? For whose benefit and at whose loss?

Our examination is rooted in a concept we term "ea o moolelo," or story sovereignty, which proposes that stories have an intrinsic right to their own unique contents, style, and purpose. This provocation views narratives not as the inanimate property of their authors, but rather as living entities with their own genealogies, spirits, and relationships to specific places and peoples. When all three rights are intact, a moolelo becomes a powerful tool for the representation and advancement of Indigenous language, culture, and

values. When any one right is lacking, the same story can be used to limit the understanding of and exploit Native people.

We approach the reclaiming of the sovereignty of Kapaemahu from two distinct perspectives: that of a Kanaka teacher and cultural practitioner and that of a Hawai'i-based Euro-American researcher and filmmaker.

As a Native person in an island nation that was illegally overthrown and continues to be occupied by a foreign power, Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu's mission is to help educate, organize, and empower her people to practice their cultural traditions, speak and understand their language, and feel an authentic connection to their history. Her guiding principle was articulated in 1864 by historian Samuel Manaiakalani Kamakau: "He makemake ko'u e pololei ka moololo o ko'u one hanau, aole na ka malihini e ao ia'u i ka moololo o ko'u lahui, na'u e ao aku i ka moololo i ka malihini ... [I want the history of my homeland to be correct. The foreigner shall not teach me the history of my people, I will teach the foreigner]" (Kamakau 1865, quoted and translated in [Nogelmeier 2010, 3](#)).

For Dean Hamer, who has previously collaborated on five film projects with Wong-Kalu, this paper is an opportunity to expand her message into the academic world. He believes that decolonization is an ongoing process that requires nonindigenous as well as Native people to be collectively involved and responsible and that Indigenous knowledge and approaches are especially valuable in broadening our understandings of gender and sexuality.

We begin by examining the history of the stones and their moololo in the context of concurrent social, political, religious, and cultural developments in Hawai'i. This approach acknowledges that the telling and retelling of Hawaiian histories is not a synchronic process but rather an ongoing series of adaptations, both in content and style. It emphasizes that while there may be multiple versions of a story, it is important to distinguish between variations that are rooted within Kanaka family traditions, originally transmitted orally from one generation to the next, as compared to more recent accounts untethered from genealogical connections and disseminated solely through modern media.

We continue by describing and critiquing our own attempt to convey and transmit the moololo of Kapaemahu through an animated film narrated in Olelo Ni'ihau. Our focus is on how the various elements of the project—including the art, script, language, and music—were chosen to reflect Hawaiian traditions and visual culture.

While understanding the evolution and malleability of a moolelo is important, it should never overshadow the narrative itself. This is particularly true for Kapaemahu, which explores Indigenous concepts and beliefs about gender and healing that are as relevant today as they were centuries ago. We argue that the cultural and historical analyses undertaken in this paper are essential to fully appreciate the underlying beliefs and values expressed by the moolelo and to help guide its future transmission and dissemination in a manner that reflects its Indigenous roots.

THE MOOLELO OF KAPAEMAHU

The Kapaemahu narrative is a moolelo, a broad term meaning “connected story” (Andrews, Silva, and Schütz 2003) or “succession of talk” (Pukui and Elbert 1986) that goes beyond the Western binary of fact versus fiction (Nogelmeier 2010), “offering access into a world where ideas about facts and single authoritative truths become complicated and nuanced in unfamiliar ways” (Osorio 2018, 18).

Recording the Tradition

Like all Hawaiian knowledge, the moolelo of Kapaemahu was originally transmitted orally. The earliest known written record of the story is a handwritten manuscript from 1906 titled “Tradition of the Wizard Stones Called Ka-Pae-Mahu on the Waikiki Sea Beach Premises of Hon. A. S. Cleghorn,” with the attribution “courtesy of Jas. H. Boyd” (Boyd 1906a). It was made available to the public in Thomas George Thrum’s *Hawaiian Almanac and Annual for 1907* (Boyd 1906b) and reprinted in 1923 under the title “The Wizard Stones of Ka-Pae-Mahu” in *More Hawaiian Folk Tales* (Boyd 1923).

The conveyor of the moolelo, James Alapuna Harbottle Boyd, was well positioned to act as a conduit for sharing the Hawaiian story with the English-speaking world of turn-of-the-century Hawai‘i. A descendant of Hawaiian High Chiefess Maria Punapanaewa Adams Boyd, an adoptive granddaughter of Kamehameha I, he rose quickly from a captain on the staff of the governor of O‘ahu to high positions within the royal family (*Honolulu Star-Bulletin* 1915). He was close to Princess Lili‘uokalani, accompanying her to England for the celebration of Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee, and, according to some accounts, inspiring her most famous musical composition, “Aloha ‘Oe” (D Forbes 2003). Boyd married Helen Caroline Maniiailehua Cleghorn, daughter of Archibald Scott

Cleghorn, on whose Waikīkī beachfront property the stones were displayed in 1905.

The recipient and publisher of the moololo, Thrum, was one of Hawai‘i’s most prolific antiquarians, best known as the publisher of the *Hawaiian Almanac and Annual*, a widely circulated repository of Hawaiian stories and information. There has been substantial scholarly critique of Thrum’s role in the appropriation, publication, and dissemination of Hawaiian literature, particularly his tendency to misinterpret text to suit the “Victorian delicacy” expected by non-Kanaka readers of the era (R Morris 2006; Bacchilega 2007; Hopkins 2019). The fact that the story of Kapaemahu was published in the almanac suggests that the subject matter, including what we now term “gender fluidity,” was considered acceptable reading material for the public.

The source of Boyd’s knowledge and whether Boyd communicated the moololo to Thrum in Hawaiian, English, or a mixture of both languages are not known. June Gutmanis’s history of the stones implicates Queen Lili‘uokalani as the originator of the story and suggests that she was aware of the names of two of the healers, Kapuni and Kahaloa (1986). Another possible source is Likelike, Boyd’s wife’s stepmother, with whom he is alleged to have had a very close relationship and who recognized the sacred nature of the stones.

The handwritten manuscript shows the original title of the story as the “Legend of the Wizard Stones Called Ka-Pae-Mahu,” but the word “Legend” was crossed out and replaced by “Tradition” (Boyd 1906a). This is an interesting substitution in that Thrum’s definition of “traditions” included early historical accounts, whereas “legends” were tilted toward more clearly fantastic accounts from earlier times. It is also noteworthy that the original title is “Tradition of the Wizard Stones *Called* Ka-Pae-Mahu” (emphasis added), clearly showing that this title refers to the stones themselves and not simply to the name of the healers’ leader.

The publication begins by comparing the moololo to “Greek mythology,” clearly aiming to attract a haole (foreign) audience; indeed, the title was included in an advertisement for the Almanac in the English-language *Honolulu Advertiser*. However, the article also appeared to be of interest to the Hawaiian-speaking population, as it was simultaneously advertised in the 4 January 1907 edition of the Olelo Hawai‘i newspaper *Ka Nupepa Kuokoa* as “He moololo kekahi no ka pohaku kahuna Kapaema-hu.” Thus, the Hawaiian title for the moololo replaces “wizards” with the respectful term “kahuna,” which encompasses experts in all areas.

The Moolelo

According to the Boyd-Thrum manuscript, the story began long ago, before the time of Chief Kakuhīhewa, when four Tahitians traveled from their home in Moaulanuiakea to Hawai‘i, where they settled in Ulukou in Waikīkī (Boyd 1906a). Their names were Kapaemahu (who was the leader), Kahaloa, Kapuni, and Kinohi (figure 1).

The visitors had both male and female attributes: their dress and behavior were typically feminine, but their stature and bearing were masculine. They were also skilled in the science of healing and performed many wonderful cures, which made them famous across O‘ahu.

When it came time for the healers to depart, they desired their services to be remembered through a tangible monument so that those who came after could see the appreciation of those they had relieved of pain and suffering. Through the gods, the people were instructed to gather at Kaimukī on the night of Kane and transport four large stones to Waikīkī, placing two near the healers’ hut and two in their bathing place in the sea.

Kapaemahu had a stone named after himself, to which he transferred his power through chant and protocol, and sacrifice was offered of a young chiefess, whose body was placed under the boulder. Idols indicating the



FIGURE 1 Artist's rendition of the stones and the four healers. From the animated short film *Kapaemahu*, directed by Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu, Dean Hamer, and Joe Wilson, art and animation directed by Daniel Sousa, 2020. Image courtesy of Kanaka Pakipika.

healers' dual sex were placed under each stone, to which the healers transferred their powers. After a full moon of ceremonies, the four visitors vanished and were never seen again.

Before the Reign of King Kakuhihewa

The narrative begins “long before the reign of King Kakuhihewa” (Boyd 1906b, 140), or Chief Kakuhihewa, the fifteenth alii aimoku of O‘ahu, who is thought to have been born in 1540. Some writers infer from this that the Tahitian healers arrived in the fifteenth century AD, while others place the story during an influx of social and religious innovations to Hawai‘i postulated to have occurred in the ninth to twelfth centuries (T Morris 2019). Either way, the story is clearly situated in the distant past, in a time divorced from the present and known only through stories and chants.

From the Land of Moaulanuiakea

The healers are said to have journeyed from “the Court of the Tahitian King” in “the land of Moaulanuiakea (Tahiti)” (Boyd 1906b, 140). Here “Tahiti” refers not to the specific island in French Polynesia but more generally to “Kahiki,” the term used collectively for the distant southern islands from which Hawaiians originated (Kamakau 1992).

Richard “Likeke” Paglinawan, who served as the historian for the 1997 restoration of the stones, journeyed to French Polynesia in 1995 to investigate the healers' origins (Pagliaro 1997). On the island of Raiatea, he met teacher and historian Jean Yves Guilloux, who pointed out a mountainous feature with the ancient name Moaulanuiakea. The congruence of place-names was of special interest because Raiatea was the residence of Tahitian ruling chiefs for centuries and carries the ancient name Hawai‘i or Havaiki.

To better understand the relevance of this location to the moololo of Kapaemahu, we spent several days in 2018 with Guilloux and members of his family and healing community on Raiatea and Tahiti. Moaulanuiakea is located on the western side of Raiatea, across the island from the famous Taputapuātea marae, and carries the present name of Mount Toomaru. Guilloux shared his belief that four distinct peaks of the mountain, which is associated with the legendary Polynesian voyaging alii Hiro, represent the four healers: a rooster-like crag to the south is said to be Kapaemahu, the next is Kinohi, the third is Kahaloha, and the final

peak represents Kapuni (Jean Yves Guilloux, pers comm, Raiatea, French Polynesia, Jan 2018).

In the valley leading up to Moaulanuiakea lie the remnants of a marae now overgrown by dense vegetation. This, according to Guilloux, was the wahi tapu (sacred place) of the Kapaemahu healers. It was from a stream running alongside this marae that Guilloux obtained the small stone, Taahu Ea (The Life), that he brought as a hoopuku (offering) to the restoration of the stones in Waikīkī in 1997 (Pagliaro 1997).

The Healers' Science and Names

The four visitors' healing practices are described only briefly in the Boyd-Thrum manuscript: "The wizards or soothsayers proved to be adepts in the science of healing and many wonderful cures by the laying on of hands are reported to have been effected [*sic*] by them" (Boyd 1906b, 140).

The Hawaiian medical practice indicated by "laying on of hands" is lomilomi, which is known today primarily as a form of therapeutic massage but in traditional times was part of a holistic healing practice that combined physical and spiritual treatments and protocols aimed at the entire person rather than a specific ailment (Gutmanis 2002).

The names of Kapaemahu's fellow healers suggest their specialties within this holistic context. Kahaloa—meaning literally "the long breath"—may indicate the ability to heal from afar. Kapuni—incorporating the word "puni," or "surround"—may signal great spiritual power or mana. Kinohi—which can be seen as a combination of "ki," "to aim," and "nohi," "origin"—can be interpreted as "all-seeing," perhaps indicating diagnostic skill. These interpretations are consistent with the healers having a range of talents across the physical, mental, and spiritual realms.

The Sacrifice Trope

According to the Boyd-Thrum manuscript, "sacrifice was offered of a lovely, virtuous young chiefess, and her body placed beneath the stone" as part of the ceremonies to transfer the healers' powers to the stones (Boyd 1906b, 141). It is difficult to reconcile this scene with historical accounts, which widely agree that the sacrifice of women was not done in ancient Hawai'i. An alternative interpretation, that this scene is a late addition to the story, is suggested by the victim's description as a "virtuous young chiefess," a character portrayal that is not found in Hawaiian moolelo but is common in twentieth-century fictional works about Pacific culture such as *Bird of Paradise*, a popular play later turned into two feature

films (T Morris 2019). This type of primitivizing discourse was typical of early efforts to market Hawai'i as a tourist destination (Desmond 1999; Rigby 1997).

GENDER AND THE MEANING OF “MAHU”

Gender plays a central role in the moolelo of Kapaemahu. Indeed, content analysis suggests that it is *the* most important theme, occupying significantly more text than healing, voyaging, or any other subject. Yet gender is also the most frequently misrepresented and misinterpreted aspect of the story, in part because interpretations of gender are inevitably intertwined with social and political influences and because the discourse on and vocabulary of the topic were so different in 1905 compared to today.

For example, the term “gender” was defined in the 1890 Webster’s dictionary solely as “a classification of nouns, primarily by sex,” with the warning that “gender is a grammatical distinction and applies to words only” (Webster and Porter 1890). It was not until 1955 that the term “gender role” came into use to distinguish individuals’ social role from their biological sex, while “transgender” was not introduced until 1965 (Burke 1989). Crucial to the Western distinction between biological sex and cultural gender was the binary of nature and culture, a concept that has been criticized by feminist scholars (Butler 2004; Gatens 2013; Strathern 2016) and that played a key role in some colonizers’ frequent misrepresentation of the fluidity of both gender and sexuality across Oceania (Besnier 1994; Besnier and Alexeyeff 2014; Kame‘eleihiwa 1992). This imposition continues to be manifested in recent times through attempts to replace Indigenous terms, such as “mahu,” with the global terminology of LGBTQIA (Matzner 2001; McMullin and Kihara 2018).

Throughout the story of Kapaemahu, the healers are depicted as having both stereotypically male and female physical characteristics and behaviors. These are rhetorically paired, suggesting that it is the combination of the two that is central to the narrative. Thus, it is their “tall stature” (masculine), along with their “courteous ways and kindly manners” (feminine), that makes the healers “loved by the Hawaiian people.” Likewise, their “fine physique” (masculine) is “overshadowed by their low, soft speech” (feminine), which “endeared them to all with whom they came in contact.” Equally telling is the observation that “their habits coincided with their feminine appearance, although manly in stature and general bearing” (Boyd 1906b, 140). In the original handwritten manuscript, the

phrase “feminine appearance” is instead “womanly seeming,” reinforcing the intention to portray the characters as having a mixture of characteristics typical of men and of women (Boyd 1906a).

The most unarguable reference to gender in the moolelo is the very name of the tradition itself: Ka-Pae-Mahu. “Ka” is the definite singular article; “pae” is a row, cluster, or group; and “mahu” is a third or intermediate gender category referring to individuals with a mixture of male and female attributes. The name’s importance is reinforced by its triple use as the title of the story, the personal name of the leader of the group, and the designation for the four stones.

The healers are also referred to in the story as of “hermaphrodite sex” or “unsexed by nature” (Boyd 1906b, 141, 140), which has long been (mis)interpreted to mean that they were biological or physical hermaphrodites—that is, intersex. The linguistic, historical, and cultural evidence described below indicates that this is incorrect and that the healers were instead mahu in the sense of having dual male and female mind, heart, and spirit.

The first known use of the word “hermaphrodite” to refer to Native people who were of dual male and female spirit occurred in 1564, when French Huguenot explorer René Goulaine de Laudonnière landed on the bank of the St Johns River in Florida and encountered “an Indian woman, of tall stature, which also was an hermaphrodite, who came before us with a great vessel, full of clear fountain water, wherewith she greatly refreshed us” (Laudonnière 1869, 236–237). The artist for the expedition painted two pictures of the “hermaphrodites,” clearly showing them as having male bodies but wearing female dress and long hair (Roscoe 1994). “Hermaphrodite” continued to be used in a nonbiological sense through the 1800s, though in 1890, Webster’s dictionary reflected a shift in usage, defining the term as “an individual which has the attributes of both male and female.” Even in 2022, the *Oxford English Dictionary* retains the nonbiological meaning in definition 1b, “An effeminate man or virile woman” (OED Online 2022a).

Similarly, the term “unsexed” referred to individuals’ behavior or social characteristics rather than their biological attributes or sexuality. The 1890 Webster’s dictionary defined “unsex” as “to make otherwise than the sex commonly is,” and early uses of the term include “His devotion to the sex then appears to unsex him. He forgets himself amid womanish pursuits,” and “men declare that the petticoatless female has unsexed herself and has left her modesty behind.”

Turning to the linguistics of “mahu,” this term is most commonly used in both Reo Maohi and Olelo Hawai‘i to describe individuals who are assigned the male sex at birth but later assume female characteristics, behaviors, or identity. In current Hawaiian orthography, the term is written as “māhū” to distinguish it from “māhu” (steam, vapor) and “mahū” (weak, flat, insipid). Tahitian uses similar orthography to distinguish “māhū” from “māhu” (fog, grow, exhale) and “mahu” (soft, to stop, taro dish).

Although the most widely used Hawaiian language dictionary retains the definition of “mahu” as “homosexual, of either sex; hermaphrodite” (Pukui and Elbert 1986), this is more a reflection of the lack of understanding of the difference between gender identity and sexuality, and of the vocabulary to distinguish the two, at the time of writing than of either the historical or current use of this word. Both the written historical record and Kanaka literature indicate that “mahu” is closer to the modern English term “transgender,” “designating a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond to that person’s sex at birth” (OED 2022b), or the related terms “gender-fluid” and “nonbinary.”

The term “mahu” first entered the written historical record in 1789 in Captain William Bligh’s 15 January entry in the *Bounty’s* logbook. Describing an encounter at the house of a high-ranking chief and his wife, he wrote: “I found with her a person, who altho I was certain was a Man, had great marks of effeminacy about him and created in me certain notions which I wished to find out if there were any foundations for. On asking Iddeeah who he was, she without any hesitation told me he was a friend of hers, and of a class of people common in Otaheite called Mahoo” (Bligh 1937, 16–17). Bligh assumed that the only explanation for this oddity was castration and thus demanded a physical inspection, only to discover that the mahu was biologically male with “his Yard & Testicles . . . drawn in under him, having the Art from custom of keeping them in this position” (1937, 17).

A similar report was made by James Morrison, who mutinied against Bligh and lived on Tahiti for two years: “They have a Set of Men Calld Mahoo. These Men are in some respects like the Eunuchs in India but are Not Castrated” (Morrison 2004, 113). Another English sailor described a shipmate who was “very much smitten with a dancing girl” he had brought on board the ship, only to discover that “this supposed damsel, when stripped of her theatrical paraphernalia, [was] a smart dapper lad” (Mortimer 1988, 47).

These three anecdotes show that mahu were recognized in precontact Tahiti, were accepted at the highest levels of society, and were similar to modern-day mahu wahine in appearance, behavior, and sexuality. There is no indication of biological hermaphroditism in any of these reports, only that foreigners were so unfamiliar with gender fluidity that they could not imagine anything other than a biological explanation. Nor was “mahu” used as a synonym for “homosexual,” since early explorers were aware that Hawaiians used the term “aikane” to describe same-sex relationships.

The use of mahu to designate a third or intermediate gender is also found in Kanaka Oivi literature, such as “A Lamentation for Kahahana” by Kalawela, in which we hear that Chief Kaumakoa changed his appearance, softened his voice, and began to sit with the lower part of the leg doubled-up to conceal as much as possible. Kalawela then indicates that this person is a mahu, perhaps from an unknown place called Honokawailani: “He *mahu* paha no Honokawailani” (1919, 297; emphasis added).

This is a clear description of a person born and originally regarded as male who is acting in a feminine way, yet Thrum translated the final line of the passage as “A *hermaphrodite* [sic] perhaps from Honokawailani” (Kalawela 1919, 297; emphasis added). Thus Thrum used “hermaphrodite” not as a *description* of mahu, but as a direct translation, despite there being no evidence or indication of biological hermaphroditism. This mistranslation appears to be at the root of the long-standing and widespread misidentification of the mahu of old as being intersex.

The great attention paid to the details of the healers’ gendered characteristics in the moolelo of Kapaemahu signals that their duality was a key component of their abilities. While there are other mentions of mahu in precontact literature, including stories from Huahine, Kaua‘i, and Hawai‘i, in these instances the gender of the characters is simply stated in passing. The healers’ use of “idols indicating the hermaphrodite sex of the wizards” to transfer their powers to the stones further supports the centrality of the healers’ dual male and female spirits to their mana and healing abilities (Boyd 1906b, 141).

The detailed description of the four visitors from Moaulanuiakea makes it clear that they were, as the very name of their moolelo states, a “group of mahu.” And there is every indication that these mahu of old, like those of today, were neither male nor female but a mixture of both in mind, heart, and spirit. They were not defined by biology (“hermaphrodite”) or sexuality (homosexual), but rather by the duality of their mana, which was an

intrinsic element of their ability to relieve pain and suffering and of the stones that bear their names.

HISTORY OF THE STONES AND THEIR MOOLELO

~1400–1910: Before Kakuhikewa to the Overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom

The stones are thought to have remained in Waikīkī until the turn of the twentieth century, serving as both a wahi pana and a marker for a dangerous spot in the outer reef known as the “Cave of the Shark God” (Grant 1996). Areas where two of the boulders were located came to bear their names: a stretch of beach called Kahaloa, famed for its fragrant limu līpoa seaweed, and the surf spot Kapuni, which Queen Lili‘uokalani described as “a rock or coral in the sea of peculiar shape that was noted for the waves breaking over it . . . the chiefs delighted to stand on its waves of the *nalu* of Kapuni” (Gutmanis 1986, 34).

The stones settled into the sand in front of ‘Āinahau, a Waikīkī estate given by Princess Ruth Ke‘elikōlani to Princess Ka‘iulani, the daughter of Queen Lili‘uokalani’s sister, Princess Likelike. Stories relate how the mother and daughter would place seaweed or flower lei on the stones and offer a prayer when entering or leaving the water (Gutmanis 1986).

Their reverence for the stones caught the attention of Likelike’s husband and Ka‘iulani’s father, Archibald Scott Cleghorn, who was the royal governor of O‘ahu from 1891 to 1893 and the father-in-law of moololo purveyor Boyd. Convinced that the “peculiar outcroppings of stones” so revered by his wife and daughter “had, in ancient times, been used in the performance of religious rites,” he decided in 1905 to excavate the stones while building a beach cottage on the oceanside plot on which they lay, across the Waikīkī Road from ‘Āinahau. He had his construction crew use jack screws to lift the eight-ton boulder protruding through the sand on his property, as well as a ten-ton stone and two others lying in a straight line on adjacent properties. The four stones, which were judged to be “not of the class found on or near the beach, but undoubtedly from the range of hills back of Kapiolani Park” (*Pacific Commercial Advertiser* 1905), were grouped together and displayed in the front yard in sight of the road (figure 2).

The newspaper article about Cleghorn’s findings was provocatively titled “SACRIFICIAL STONE IDOLS AND SKELETON: Interesting



FIGURE 2 The stones of Kapaemahu in the yard of Governor Archibald Cleghorn’s Waikīki Beach house in 1910, five years after they were resurfaced and grouped together. This view is from the ocean side toward the mountains, with a white picket fence in the background fronting Kalākaua Avenue. Photograph courtesy of Bishop Museum.

Find by Ex-Gov. Cleghorn on Waikiki Beach Lot—Relics of a Barbarian Past Uncovered” (*Pacific Commercial Advertiser* 1905). It was the first time the sacred stones had entered the written record, and the sensationalist headline foreshadowed the style that would be employed in the publication of the moololo of the stones the following year.

What garnered considerable attention was the finding of skeletal remains, specifically a jawbone, under the largest stone, which led Cleghorn to opine that the stones were a site of human sacrifice (*Pacific Commercial Advertiser* 1905). This subject was of such interest that within a few months the story had been embellished to the effect that Cleghorn had discovered the remains of Kamehameha I, which required a subsequent disavowal headlined “Royal Remains Were Not Found. How Rumor Grew” (*Evening Bulletin* 1905).

Also found under the boulders were several smaller stones that were interpreted as “four or five very crude idols.... Only those who are acquainted with Hawaiian idols would have recognized the almost shapeless stones as figures before which the ancient Hawaiians made their devotions and offerings.” Two of these were cemented on top of the largest boulder, and the others on the eight-ton stone (*Pacific Commercial Advertiser* 1905). These kii (images, idols, statues) are indeed “rudely shaped,” with the head indicated by a smaller round stone and the body by one or two larger rocks. The top stones appear to have a porous texture, typical of female kii, compared to the bottom ones, which have the smoother surface characteristic of male stones. Unfortunately, these important symbolic objects were lost when the site was destroyed in 1941.

Why did Cleghorn excavate the stones rather than leave them in place, and why did he do so at this point in time rather than before? Perhaps he realized that if he did not excavate them, they would likely be lost forever under the large amount of new construction that was being undertaken to provide amenities for visitors. His son, Thomas Alexander Kaulaahi Cleghorn, recalled that “my father built a two-story dwelling and had the Wizard Stones on our property facing Kalakaua.... As a child I played on and around the stones, knowing they held some strange and exciting mana, always respecting the lore connected with them” (Cleghorn 1979). At least within the elder Cleghorn’s own domain, the stones and their connection to Hawai‘i’s last royal family were safe.

1910–1941: Buried under a Bowling Alley

The importance of the stones to Cleghorn as a symbol of the Hawaiian way was reinforced when he wrote his will in 1910. Item twenty read, “It is my wish and I hereby direct that the historical stones now upon the premises last above mentioned shall not be defaced or removed from said premises” (quoted in Gutmanis 1986, 35). Sometime after his death, his son offered the stones to the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, but the institution did not accept them.

These noble attempts to preserve the past proved futile in the face of the dramatic changes that swept across Hawai‘i over the next three decades, including the sharp decline in the Native population and a loss of interest in and support for Kanaka practices. A 1941 photograph shows the boulders in the same arrangement as in 1910, still facing Kalākaua Avenue but almost obscured by foliage and the rental beach cottages now occupying

the property ([Hollingsworth 1941](#)). The stones were unmolested but sinking into obscurity.

The development with perhaps the greatest impact on the stones was the expansion of the United States military presence in Hawai‘i. By the time Franklin Delano Roosevelt made the first presidential visit to the Islands in 1934, more than twenty thousand American soldiers and sailors were stationed in Hawai‘i. A military film from this period shows a large group of sailors taking a streetcar to Waikikī, where they gleefully disembark in search of entertainment ([Smith \[1930s?\]](#)).

It was in this environment that the Hawaiian Enterprises Company decided to lease the Cleghorn property in June 1941 to build one of America’s quintessential forms of amusement—a bowling alley. “About eight tons of rock, worth its weight in Hawaiian historical significance, are about to be removed” stated an accompanying newspaper article. “The stones will either have to be blasted out or removed elsewhere” ([Hollingsworth 1941](#)).

The plans were cause for consternation at the Hawaiian Civic Club. “These stones should be preserved for their traditional value and in order to retain our individuality as a community,” stated Mrs Flora Hayes, the president of the club. “If this is not done,” she continued, “Hawaii will lose its color and we will be just another American community” ([Honolulu Advertiser 1941a](#)). Another letter writer wrote a poem that called the decisions “a disgrace” ([E R S 1941](#)).

Apparently, these pleas carried weight, for a month later, the Honolulu planning commission ordered a ten-foot setback line for the bowling alley, and plans were revealed for a concrete walk between the stones at the Kalākaua Avenue entrance. “This should satisfy the Hawaiian society that objected to the removal of the stones,” said developer Herbert A Truslow ([Honolulu Advertiser 1941b](#)). However, despite his promise, there was no setback, and the stones were completely covered over by the bowling alley. It was not the first time a developer had lied about their commitment to preservation, and it would not be the last.

1941–1980: Resurfaced yet Hidden

In December 1941, just a few months after the burial of the stones under Waikiki Bowl, the Imperial Japanese Navy attacked Pearl Harbor. For the next four years, the preservation of a Hawaiian historical site was not a priority.

The end of the war in August 1945 was the beginning of a new era in Hawai'i. The United States was increasingly seen by the public as savior rather than colonizer, culminating with statehood in 1959, and the economy became increasingly dependent on tourism. Thousands of hotel rooms were constructed, and there was a push to rid Waikīkī of its honky-tonk amusements in favor of a more family-friendly ambiance.

It was in this climate that the City and County of Honolulu decided in 1958 to condemn and tear down the structures along Kalākaua Avenue to build a public beach park. Cleghorn's descendants fought against the seizure of their parcel by eminent domain but eventually settled for US \$574,000. On 29 October 1962, workers from Dan's Lumber Yard began demolition (*Honolulu Star-Bulletin* 1962; *Honolulu Advertiser* 1962).

The largest stone was discovered first. Then, as demolition and clearing continued, the other three were found. Fortunately, there were kupuna (elders) who remembered the significance of the stones and urged that they be kept in the area in accordance with Governor Cleghorn's will. The Department of Parks agreed and elected to embed the stones deep in the sand "so as not to mar the landscape or interfere with the use of the beach." They also had a plaque made for the "Wizard Stones of Kapaemahu," which explained the Tahitian origins of the healers but made no mention of them being mahu. The accompanying newspaper article was similarly circumspect, making no mention of gender even though the writer was clearly familiar with Boyd and Thrum's rendition of the moolelo (*Honolulu Advertiser* 1963).

The stones were dedicated in September 1963 in a ceremony attended by Neal Blaisdell, the mayor of Honolulu, and Mary Kawena Pukui, preeminent Hawaiian scholar and educator. Pukui knew the moolelo of the stones, which she referred to as "pae-mahu" (a row of mahu), and opined that the four mahu "were respected men; talented priests of healing and of the hula. Whether this is history or legend, it reflects attitudes of approval and admiration" (Pukui, Haertig, and Lee 1983).

Why, despite the unearthing of the stones and the historical knowledge and admiration of Pukui, was the connection of the site to gender diversity pushed underground?

As fate would have it, the recovery of the stones coincided temporally with one of the most manifestly transphobic episodes in the history of Hawai'i: the passage of a law necessitating mahu to publicly identify their birth sex to avoid arrest. The events leading to the legislation began in the mid-1950s, when several Honolulu nightclubs started to feature female

impersonator shows such as the “boys will be girls” show at The Glade in Chinatown, which was promoted as a “glittering and sophisticated evening.”

The shows were also a magnet for military personnel, who were alternately fascinated and repulsed by the mahu. Their confusion, mixed with machismo and alcohol, predictably led to violence, including the brutal assault of a showgirl by a sailor who claimed that he did not know her gender identity.

The backlash against mahu began in February 1963—just as the bowling alley was being demolished—with a three-part newspaper series headlined “Sex Deviates Stalk Drunk Servicemen,” written by Bob Jones, a newly arrived reporter from the mainland (Jones 1963a, 1963b, 1963c). Jones did not include interviews with any of the mahu, despite being well known to them, and instead placed the blame fully on the victims, reporting that the real problem was the lack of a law prohibiting men from “masquerading” as women. With support from the Honolulu Police Department, military authorities, and local churches, Act 175 prohibiting the “wear[ing of] clothing of the opposite sex in any public place with intent to deceive other persons” was passed into law in June 1963 (Hawai‘i State Legislature 1963). It was just one in a long string of discriminatory regulations imposed on Hawai‘i to buttress Western notions of morality and propriety (Merry 2000).

Although the law claimed to protect mahu, it actually had just the opposite effect, allowing individuals to be arrested and charged solely on the basis of their gender expression. “The brutality of the police was horrible,” said Aunty Harmony Kaleika‘apuni Mauakea Brighter, a hairdresser for one of the most popular entertainers. “They would beat up the queens and cut their hair butch. It was horrible, just horrible” (pers comm, Aug 2021).

Exasperated with the number of cases appearing before him, District Court Magistrate Francis DeMello suggested that showgirls wear a button proclaiming, “I Am a Boy,” which a manager at the Glade had manufactured to include the club’s name and address. “The girls were very creative,” said Aunty Harmony. “They made glitter signs and put it right below their hips or something. But it was still the same. You were still mahu” (pers comm, Aug 2021).

The “Intent to Deceive” law remained on the books until 1973. Throughout this period, gender and sexual minorities in Hawai‘i were referred to in the press and popular literature as “drag queen,”

“transvestite,” “deviate,” “homosexual,” or “queer.” The term “mahu” was not used, as it had become a derogatory slur, similar to “faggot” or “dyke,” and was considered unprintable in mainstream sources.

The stones remained half buried on Kūhiō Beach for seventeen years. There they silently witnessed an explosive growth of tourism in Waikīkī, which was marketed as a heterosexual and cisnormative paradise characterized by the idealized image of a hula girl (Alexeyeff and McDonnell 2018; Trask 1991/1992), and the cultural and political reawakening engendered by the Hawaiian Renaissance, a movement with a complex relationship to Hawaiian perceptions of gender (Kauanui 2018; Tengan 2008). Despite the resurgence of interest in Kanaka language, hula, traditional navigation, voyaging, and culture during this period, the stones of Kapaemahu commanded little respect. Within a few days of their resurfacing in 1963, the historic boulders were splashed with red paint (*Honolulu Advertiser* 1963).

Wong-Kalu recalls playing on the stones as a child visiting Waikīkī Beach with her family. “I didn’t know any better, and neither did my parents. You can’t blame them. Nobody in their generation learned the old stories. Their teachers wanted them to be Americans, not Kanaka.”

1980–1993: The Lady in Red

In 1980, a small change in the physical position of the stones, to make way for a new restroom on Kūhiō Beach, led to a major distortion in public understanding of their story.

To facilitate construction, the stones were moved about thirty feet and piled haphazardly next to a pile of sewage and water pipes flanked by a dumpster (Borg 1980; see also Jindra 1980). The newspapers reported a city employee’s reassurances that the stones had received “both Christian and Hawaiian blessings” (Borg 1980). More surprising was the coverage given to “Madam Pele devotee Leatrice Ballesteros,” who conjured that the spirits within the stones were “Kapaemahu, a healer and male; Kahaloa, a beneficent female; Kapuni, an evil male; and Kinohi, a female who brings blessings to homes” (Borg 1980).

Ballesteros was a Filipino-Japanese clairvoyant who first came to public attention in 1943 for fortune-telling and later became known as “The Lady in Red” for dressing completely in red garments during her frequent trips to the Kīlauea volcano on Hawai‘i Island, where she would throw gin bottles and cigarettes into the crater and then claim to have stopped or extended the eruption, as the case might be (*Honolulu Star-Bulletin* 1965).

Ballesteros lacked any genealogical connection to the stones, did not Olelo Hawai'i, and had no background or training in Hawaiian history, culture, or healing practices (*Sunday Honolulu Star-Bulletin and Advertiser* 1987). Nevertheless, her notion that there were two male and two female healers and stones rather than ka-pae-mahu—a group of four mahu—replaced the original moolelo in numerous newspaper and magazine articles, tourist publications, and even some scholarly work.² The willingness to suppress the importance of mahu to the story is perhaps not surprising in an era when Hawai'i's newspapers were full of stories of transgender women as targets of violence, ranging from bar fights to murder.

1993–2000: Resituated, Renamed, and Reinterpreted

The current incarnation of the stones began in 1993 with the publication of *Restoring Hawaiianness to Waikiki*, which proposed that the “Wizard Stones” be designated a wahi pana. The author was George Kanahale, a Hawaiian historian, author, and tourism promoter who urged Kanaka to embrace the visitor industry and developers to “make more judicious use of Hawaiian myths and legends” (Kanahale 1994, Goal O).

Kanahale's vision began to come to fruition in 1995 when the Queen Emma Foundation formed a planning committee to consider ways to restore honor to the site by revitalizing and beautifying the pohaku (Pagliaro 1997). The committee chose Papa Henry Auwae, a kupuna and pookela kahuna laau lapaau (herbal and spiritual healer) from Hawai'i Island with a long history of advocating for traditional Hawaiian medical practices, as spiritual and cultural advisor. According to Kumu Tony K Conjugacion, whom Papa Auwae entrusted with composing both his own name chant and ceremonial chants for the stones, “What frustrated Papa was the fact that people had no idea what the significance was of the pohaku. People would be drying their towels on it, putting their surfboards on it, and just using it as a place to rest. And he wanted the moolelo behind that to be revived” (pers comm, March 2021).

Papa Auwae was protective of the mana within the “row of mahu” and concerned that some beginning students might inadvertently drain their spiritual power. He therefore asked Kumu Conjugacion to compose a mala, or protective chant, which was performed over the stones at a private ceremony, and restricted discussion of their duality to advanced students. According to Papa Auwae, the mahu healers had a “gentle energy and gentle souls” that allowed them to disarm even those who doubted their

abilities “so that they could get to their kuleana, which was to heal them” (Conjugacion, pers comm, March 2021).

Over the course of a month, the stones were excavated and lifted out of the sand, a paepae (stone platform) and ahu (altar) were built, and then each stone was placed on top of the altar in the same relative position as before. An iron fence was built around the site, the spaces between the stones were filled in with iliili (small stones), and the site was planted with laau (plants of medicinal value). Each step was accompanied by ceremonies and rituals led by Papa Auwae at auspicious times in the lunar calendar (Pagliaro 1997). A Tahitian delegation, including cultural historian Pierre Sham Koua and his student Guilloux, were present for the opening ceremony and offered the stone named Taahu Ea that Guilloux had brought from the healers’ home of Moaulanuiakea.

The resulting City and County of Honolulu monument, which was dedicated on 9 April 1997, elevated and physically protected the stones. But perhaps the most significant changes were the new name and altered history, written on the accompanying plaques, that dissociate the stones from their original intent as a memorial to the healing power of four mahu.³

The new English name, “The Stones of Life,” eliminates the word Kapaemahu, by which the stones were originally defined. The Hawaiian title, “Nā Pōhaku Ola Kapaemāhū ā Kapuni” (The Stones of Life of Kapaemahu at Kapuni), does include the name Kapaemahu, but its importance is diminished by the tacking on of the name of a different healer, Kapuni, for reasons that were not explained. Both titles redefine the essence of the stones as objects “of life,” an idea absent from the original tellings of their story.

The history written on the plaques continues this theme by ignoring the healers’ many gendered characteristics that are described in the Boyd-Thrum moolelo. There is no mention of their “manly stature” and “fine physique,” their “feminine appearance” and “soft speech,” or the dual-sex idols placed under the stones. These omissions are not for lack of space on the plaque, which contains several added details that are less relevant to the story.

Two weeks following the dedication ceremony, Kanahale proposed an even more radical redefinition of Kapaemahu, which he attributed to Koua: “The Healing Stones are divorced from association from homosexuality. . . . ‘*Kapae*’ means ‘to set aside’; ‘*mahu*’ means ‘homosexual desire.’ The healers, therefore, were required to cleanse themselves of any sexual thoughts when engaged in healing” (Krauss 1997). This redefinition is

difficult to understand. Koua's student Guilloux, who accompanied him to the blessing ceremony, does not recall his mentor ever mentioning anything about the stones being "divorced from homosexuality," but rather that he emphasized their association with spirituality. Furthermore, the interpretation of Kapaemahu as "Kapae-" (to set aside) "mahu" (homosexuality) is inconsistent with Hawaiian linguistics. Noted Hawaiian language scholar Puakea Nogelmeier commented that "grammatically it doesn't hold together, culturally it doesn't hold together, and he did not understand Hawaiian language. There would be no way to get that interpretation if you really understood the words you're looking at" (pers comm, Dec 2019). Kanahale's reinterpretation is also at odds with his own published interpretation of the moololo, in which he noted that the healers were "unsexed by nature" (Boyd 1906b, 140, quoted in Kanahale 1996, 54). It is difficult to imagine why this, or indeed any monument, would be dedicated to a characteristic *lacking* in the individuals it is meant to memorialize.

The concurrent sociopolitical climate likely played a role in Kanahale's radical reinterpretation. In the same year as the dedication ceremony, a coalition of conservative, religious, and anti-LGBTQIA forces, responding to a Hawai'i Supreme Court decision in favor of same-sex marriages, proposed the first constitutional amendment in the United States to specifically prohibit such unions. The campaign, coordinated and funded by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, of which Kanahale was a member, was bitter, with supporters warning of "a social earthquake that will mock, mimic, and ultimately destroy society's basic building block" (Coral Ridge Ministries 1996). Mike Gabbard, founder of "Stop Promoting Homosexuality Hawaii," issued a video in which his family, including his daughter, future US Representative Tulsi Gabbard, compared same-sex marriages to incest and bestiality. The amendment passed by a nearly 70 percent margin (Issenberg 2020).

Given Kanahale's emphasis on the economic benefits of promoting Hawaiian culture, he may have seen any association of the stones with mahu, and therefore in the public eye with homosexuality and same-sex marriage, as harmful to their value as a tourist attraction. Kanahale also may have felt that acknowledging the association of the monument with gender diversity would be counter to his Mormon religious beliefs and community.

The prevailing sentiment of the time was summed up in a conversation with a Waikiki kupuna and longtime hotel tour guide: "Everybody knew

they were mahu, but you could never say that. They [opponents] would have destroyed the stones! That’s why we kept it so hush-hush” (pers comm, March 2019; anonymity preferred).

The Stones Today

There have been no major physical alterations to the stones since 1997. Although the monument is located on one of the busiest sections of the beach (figure 3), few passersby take notice, aside from the stones’ occasional use as a backdrop for wedding photographs. Public understanding of the moolelo of Kapaemahu continues to be a “mixed bag,” with most popular reports either ignoring or sidestepping the role of mahu. *Lonely Planet*, for example, describes the stones as “a complete mystery” (Benson 2013). Exceptions include the thoughtful book *Waikiki: A History of Forgetting and Remembering* (Chan and Feeser 2006), a master’s thesis from the University of Hawai’i (T Morris 2019), and the original version of an inventory of healing spaces in Kona Moku, O’ahu, prepared by Nohopapa Hawai’i (2020).⁴ However, the most widely consumed version of the narrative in recent times has been the animated short film *Kapaemahu*, directed by the authors and Joe Wilson and described in



FIGURE 3 The stones of Kapaemahu in 2019. This view is from Kalākaua Avenue facing the ocean. The Duke Kahanamoku statue is to the left, the Waikiki Police substation to the right. Photograph courtesy of Kanaka Pakipika.

the following section (Wong-Kalu, Hamer, and Wilson 2020; see also [Wikipedia Contributors 2021](#); [Kapaemahu nd](#)).

THE MANA OF MOOLELO

As the early Polynesians ventured from the ancestral lands of Kahiki to Hawai'i and beyond, they recounted their encounters and experiences as an extensive collection of oral narratives. Stories of gods and mortals, heroes and villains, battles and love affairs, voyages and discoveries were passed on through chant, song, and dance, with each family and generation adding its own variations. The evolution of the moolelo of Kapaemahu provides interesting insights on how this process was influenced by the sociopolitical, economic, religious, and cultural environment of the past century and continues today with the introduction of new storytelling approaches and devices.

Because moolelo have played such a central role in the transmission of Hawaiian culture, they have been the topic of considerable academic interest. Beginning with Lilikalā Kame'elehiwa's noted "Native Land and Foreign Desires" (1992) and Haunani-Kay Trask's seminal essay "Decolonizing Hawaiian Literature" (1999), a growing number of Kanaka scholars have stressed the importance of working with Hawaiian-language sources. The work of ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui (2014, 2017), Noenoe K Silva (2004), Silva and Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o (2017), Brandy Nālani McDougall (2016), and Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio (2018), among others, has revealed the rich intellectual history preserved in the ever-growing archive of Hawaiian-language newspapers. Other scholars, such as Cristina Bacchilega (2007, 2015), have focused on the ways that translating and interpreting Hawaiian moolelo for outside audiences have decontextualized and delegitimized Indigenous narratives, converting Kanaka from storytellers into informants.

Each telling of a Hawaiian moolelo is a mana, a term of special significance because of its parallel meaning of spiritual power. As we consider the mana of Kapaemahu, three questions are paramount: What was told? How was it told? For what purpose?

Although it is likely that there were at one time multiple oral versions of Kapaemahu, as has been documented for other Hawaiian narratives such as Hiiakaikapoliopole (ho'omanawanui 2014; McDougall 2016; Osorio 2018), the only version of Kapaemahu that survived the funnel of colonization and language suppression was the 1906 Boyd-Thrum manuscript.

The first mass media retelling of the story—the 1941 newspaper article written in response to the plans to build a bowling alley over the stones—cleaved closely to the original version of the moolelo, including the description of the healers’ gendered characteristics and the dual-sex idols placed under the stones. It was only two decades later, after the stones were unearthed and placed on the beach, that the story began to be changed, at first simply by the omission of any mention of mahu, then by its alteration to a story about two males and two females, and most recently by the suggestion that the “row of mahu” are actually the “not homosexual” stones.

These misrepresentations were a major motive for our attempt to reclaim the original moolelo through the animated short film *Kapaemahu* (2020). By relying on the earliest written version of the narrative for the script, our film endeavors to describe the healers and their accomplishments as they might once have been conveyed through oral storytelling. But in the spirit of self-critique, we acknowledge that we too were selective, as we chose not to include the “virgin sacrifice” in the film because we believe that this was a late addition to the story and thus unlikely to have been included in earlier oral versions.

The manner in which the story has been told has changed less frequently. From the 1906 handwritten Boyd-Thrum manuscript until 2020, the sole mode of communication was written English, which is easily reproduced and readily distributed through multiple platforms. But there are also serious limitations to written moolelo in the English language. Oral storytelling is not simply the recitation of a string of words; rather, it is a performance in which the storyteller’s expressions, sounds, articulations, and gestures play an essential role. Translation into English may also have lost much of the rich context provided by Olelo Hawai‘i. As ho‘omanawanui noted, “What is lost is not merely linguistic, as no language translates directly into any other language, but more importantly, the loss includes cultural concepts, poetics, aesthetics, and values” (2017, 72).

These limitations played a major role in our decision to convey the moolelo of *Kapaemahu* through an animated film narrated in Olelo Ni‘ihau. We choose animation as the format because of its ability to literally “paint a picture,” bringing alive the characters and actions of the story even for those not able to understand the words, and to convey abstract ideas in concrete form. For example, in *Kapaemahu*, streams of light and energy emanating from a male and a female are intertwined into a new figure to portray the dual mind, heart, and spirit of mahu—a representation that could not be achieved using live characters. The film also portrays the four mahu as

larger than the other characters, not as an indication of their physical presence but rather as a representation of their internal mana.

In developing the art style for the production, the goal was to achieve a look consistent with the many manifestations of Pacific Islander visual culture. The patterns and geometric shapes of tapa, the bark cloth valued across Oceania, were an important inspiration. Tiki carving, also common across the region, was the basis for the painting style, which uses light and shadow rather than lines to establish the shapes of objects and characters. The stones themselves were extensively photographed to build a three-dimensional representation of the site and to provide a rough texture used throughout the film. The red-orange-rust palette, one of the most notable features of the art, was derived from the colors of tapa and lauhala weaving.

The decision to “reverse translate” the moololo from English into Olelo Ni‘ihau recognizes that language is more than a way of communicating; it is a deeply ingrained component of culture, tradition, and values that reflects a society’s core philosophy. The language of the island of Ni‘ihau is the only form of Hawaiian that has been continuously spoken since before Western contact, and it is closest to the language of Tahiti that would have been spoken by the healers, as exemplified by the frequent use of “t” instead of “k.” This gives viewers the opportunity to hear the moololo in a form that may be closer to the way it was originally transmitted than standard academic Hawaiian would be.

Finally, there is the “why” question, beginning with Boyd’s motivation to first convey the moololo in 1906. Given the timing, this seems likely to have been prompted by the unearthing and regrouping of the stones two years earlier by his father-in-law, Cleghorn, who was building a beach house on the oceanfront property. A cynical view is that Cleghorn simply wanted to clear the way for construction. But, given the ex-governor’s strong interest in historic preservation, his wife Likelike and daughter Ka‘iulani’s reverence for the site, and the fact that he would later single out the stones in his will, it seems more likely that he was sincerely concerned with the preservation of this wahi pana.

There can be little doubt about the motivation for desecrating the stones some thirty-six years later by burying them under a bowling alley: it was greed, pure and simple. The developer knew full well that the stones were significant, and even agreed to protect them, but in the pursuit of profit, that promise was ignored. This “was a period of red-white-and-blue Americanization” when “everyone tried to be good Americans” ([Kanahele 1982, 12](#)).

After the stones were recovered in 1963, their story became more nuanced. As physical objects, the great boulders were increasingly respected and protected. They were lifted out from underground, marked with a plaque, and eventually placed on a prominent platform and guarded by a fence. No longer can this wahi pana be trampled over or ignored; it has a distinct presence in a highly visible area of one of the most popular beaches in the world. Yet at the same time, the story and meaning of the stones has been progressively degraded, and a site that was intended to honor the healers as a permanent reminder of their accomplishments has been transfigured into a healing shrine meant to benefit visitors, even though they may not know the source of the stones' mana.

The efforts to protect the stones can be viewed historically within the context of the second Hawaiian renaissance, which was inspired by John Dominis Holt IV's influential 1964 essay *On Being Hawaiian* and blossomed into a major cultural revival in the 1970s (Holt 1976). Certainly, Kanahēle viewed his work as an outgrowth of this movement, as reflected in his attention to traditional Hawaiian protocols and the use of Olelo Hawai'i in the 1997 restoration of the stones.

Ironically, it was precisely this aim of restoring Oiwī culture that may have been at the root of the depreciation of the stones and their story. Realizing the powerful, Western-inspired transphobia and homophobia that had become prevalent in Hawai'i, as signaled by people's enthusiastic embrace of legislation opposing cross-dressing and same-sex marriage, those who most revered the stones were the most reluctant to reveal their connection to gender fluidity. In a world where the word "mahu" had become a vulgar slur, those who regarded themselves as guardians of culture were more willing to simply not utter the word than to try and explain it.

This is one of the most pernicious aspects of colonialism: its ability to create a climate in which cultural authenticity appears to be bad or harmful. Intolerant politicians, preachers, journalists, and military personnel did not directly suppress the moolelo of Kapaemahu; they simply created an atmosphere in which even Kanaka thought it was the "right"—or at least a necessary—thing to do.

EA O MOOLELO: TOWARD STORY SOVEREIGNTY

It is impossible to separate the stones and the story of Kapaemahu, or indeed any aspect of Hawaiian culture, from the concept of sovereignty.

Although the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893 was a political and economic act backed by military force, its impact soon extended into every aspect of Hawaiian life, including language, tradition, and literature.

Several scholars have called for thinking about sovereignty outside of strictly political and legal parameters as a critical tool for decolonial practice (Teves, Smith, and Raheja 2015). Michelle H Raheja coined the term “visual sovereignty” (2010) to refer to a creative practice of self-representation that can be “more imaginative, pleasurable, flexible and often humorous” than is “possible in official political contexts” (2015, 29). The idea of “cultural sovereignty” extends this framework to include linguistic practices, relationship to the land, and sexual and gender identity formation, often in ways that circumvent settler colonialism (Cox 2014; Driskill and others 2011). “Intellectual sovereignty” positions self-determination as an open-ended process and has played a key role in the establishment of Indigenous studies programs and educational institutions (Warrior 1994; J Forbes 1998).

To this we propose adding the concept of *ea o moolelo*, or story sovereignty: the inalienable right of a story to its own unique contents, style, and purpose. Inspired by the successful claim of the Māori people of personhood for the Whanganui River (Hutchison 2014), this theory views *moolelo* as living beings with their own prerogatives, privileges, and responsibilities. This is in diametric opposition to the Western concept of “story right,” a legal agreement by which people buy and sell permission to commodify an individual’s name and life experiences. By giving agency to the narrative itself, *ea o moolelo* protects the story from claims of exclusivity while allowing it to live and breathe with freedom and integrity.

Osorio noted that “instead of being frozen in time and ink, *mo‘olelo* move and shape-shift. They have many *kino*” (2018, 19). In addition to their adaptability through successive generations, *moolelo* have relationships to people, including both their storytellers and the people they portray, and to families, places, and *aina* (the land). When these relationships are severed, violence is done. In the case of Kapaemahu, the suppression of the role of *mahu* has been particularly harmful for all those who transcend the Western gender binary and could even threaten the site’s status as a *wahi pana* by rendering it a site of conflict and protest.

The modern history of the healer stones exemplifies the power of colonialism—with tourism, the church, the media, capitalism, and the state as its agents working in consort—to erase the traditions and worldview of a Native people. What happened to the moolelo of Kapaemahu, in particular the many attempts to suppress the healers' gender fluidity, is what happened to the Hawaiian people writ large. Our work intends to reclaim the moolelo, and the respected role of mahu, not as an end in itself but as part of the broader movement toward *ea o moolelo*.

The purposes of our work on Kapaemahu are multiple. For Hamer, it reflects a core belief that the burdens of oppression should not be borne solely by the oppressed but instead shared by those responsible. Using film, academic publications, and other media platforms to make this moolelo widely known is a step in that direction, as is the growing movement to have the signage at the site better reflect its history and meaning. Because Kapaemahu carries such an important and timely message of diversity and acceptance, it will benefit all who hear it and thus deserves the widest possible attention.

For Wong-Kalu, Kapaemahu is one of many stories that represent the wisdom and knowledge of her people and ancestors. This particular moolelo highlights the healers' status as mahu, but what makes them unique is not just their duality but also their ability to harness that power to enhance their healing and service to the people. Reclaiming this moolelo is an opportunity to lift up the language, the culture, and the name of Hawai'i. In her words, "It is not enough to read Hawaiian stories in an American classroom, or to learn history from a textbook written in English. Our survival as Indigenous people depends on our ability to know and practice our cultural traditions, to speak and understand our language, and to feel an authentic connection to our own history."

* * *

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Notes

1 To be consistent with the films, exhibition, and book associated with the Kapaemahu project, which follow the simple orthography that was employed in Hawaiian-language literature and newspapers prior to the introduction of the diacritics that aid students and teachers of Hawaiian as a second language, the authors have chosen not to use diacritics for most Hawaiian-language words in this article, with the exception of place-names.

2 Gutmanis reiterated the notion that there were two males and two females, rather than four mahu, in her writing about the stones (1986, 33), but she failed to reference Ballesteros as the source. This error led Paglinawan to misinterpret Ballesteros's speculation as "the written history" of the stones, which he recapitulated almost verbatim in an unpublished addendum to the Fields Masonry report that accompanied the stones' restoration: "According to recent stories, Kapaemahu was a male healer; Kahaloa, a beneficent female; Kapuni, another male; and Kinoki, a female bringing blessings to homes" (Paglinawan 1997, 2).

3 The text of these plaques, written in Olelo Hawai'i and English and on display at the Kapaemahu site on Waikīkī Beach, can be viewed online at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5de3245c3e9c044c1acd17bo/t/61e7819933b3024d5c3a17af/1642561945516/Hawaiian+and+English+language+Kapaemahu+plaques.pdf> (accessed 21 July 2022).

4 The original inventory Nohopapa Hawai'i prepared, which they published on their website, describes the stones in this way: "The definition of Ka Pae Mahu is simply the row (or group) of māhū. This is the meaning passed on by our kūpuna, and it [is] thought [to be] both the name of the stones themselves and of the leader of the four healers whose mana is imbued within them. This name tells us that being māhū wasn't just something coincidental, it's intrinsic to the essence and power of the healers" (2020). However, when Papa Ola Lōhaki, which commissioned and funded the research, published and distributed the inventory the following year, this portion of the report and all references to mahu were completely removed. Other parts of the report were not changed (Nohopapa 2021).

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Abstract

On Waikīkī Beach stand four large stones known as Kapaemahu (the row of mahu), which according to a traditional moolelo carry the living spirits of four individuals of dual male and female spirit who brought healing arts from Tahiti to Hawai'i. Although the stones have survived for centuries, they have often been mistreated, and their story has been altered to suppress the respected role of mahu. In this paper, we examine the history of the stones and their moolelo in the context of concurrent social, political, religious, and cultural developments in Hawai'i, including modern controversies over gender and sexuality. We also describe our own attempt to convey and transmit the moolelo of Kapaemahu through an animated film narrated in Olelo Ni'ihau. This type of multifactorial cultural and historical analysis is important for understanding the beliefs and values expressed by traditional moolelo, and it helps guide their future transmission and dissemination in a manner that reflects the concept of ea o moolelo, or story sovereignty: the intrinsic right of a story to its own unique contents, style, and purpose.

KEYWORDS: history, story sovereignty, healing, gender, diversity, mahu