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Ma ka Hana ka ‘Ike (In the Work Is the Knowledge): Kaona as Rhetorical Action

Drawing on Malea Powell’s “rhetorics of survivance” and Scott Richard Lyons’s “rhetorical sovereignty” as a framework, we examine how kaona, a Hawaiian rhetorical device, is employed within Queen Lili‘uokalani’s autobiography and Haunani-Kay Trask’s poetry as a call for Hawaiian resistance against American colonialism through allusions to Pele-Hi‘iaka stories.

Recent projects in composition and rhetoric, such as this special issue of College Composition and Communication and Damián Baca and Victor Villanueva’s 2010 anthology Rhetorics of the Americas: 3114 BCE to 2012 CE, represent the field’s increased focus on the heretofore largely underexamined rhetorics of indigenous peoples. Close analyses of such texts have significant implications for composition and rhetoric because, as Baca notes, “[a]ccounting for [indigenous rhetorical] practices . . . provides more accurate understandings of how indigenous artists and writers have responded and continue to respond to imperialist teleology and Western expansion,” and can potentially counter what Baca calls a European hegemony over “political ideology, cultural meanings, and historical narratives” (1–3). Other scholars, such as Malea Powell, have argued, however, that even when such examinations have been conducted,
analyses are often encumbered with colonial/paracolonial ideologies that result in misreadings and, in turn, misrepresentations. Consequently, Powell calls for greater sensitivity in examinations of indigenous texts and suggests that framing such analysis within a theory of “rhetorics of survivance,” borrowing Gerald Vizenor’s term *survivance* (*survival + resistance*), can facilitate the acknowledgment of both the continued survival and resistance of indigenous peoples and their literatures. She writes:

For Vizenor, and for myself, this means not only reimagining the possibilities for existence and ironic identity within Native communities, but also reimagining a scholarly relationship to writings by Indian peoples, one that hears the multiplicities in those writings and in the stories told about them. (401)

A rhetorics of survivance, then, emphasizes that indigenous texts as well as texts written about indigenous peoples must be recognized and read as articulations of the paracolonial status of Native Americans.

Powell’s description of composition and rhetoric’s scholarship on American Indian texts echoes assertions made by Scott Richard Lyons, who writes that while the literature of the past decade demonstrates the discipline’s efforts at including Native ways of knowing in scholarly discussions and classroom curricula, representations of Native texts, and correspondingly Native peoples, often include “Indian stereotypes and cultural appropriation” and are virtually void of “discourse on sovereignty and the status of Indian nations” (458). To more fully capture the rhetorical breadth of Native American texts, Lyons advances the term *rhetorical sovereignty* to describe “the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (449–50). Rhetorical sovereignty, as Lyons asserts, counters “rhetorical imperialism,” which he sees as “definitional” and hegemonic, “setting the terms of the debate . . . by identifying the parties discussed by describing them in certain ways” (452). Given this, Lyons points out that rhetorical sovereignty “requires above all the presence of an Indian voice, speaking or writing in an ongoing context of colonization and setting at least some of the terms of debate” (462). Like Powell’s remarks, Lyon’s call for composition and rhetoric literature to divert from and question its own employment of rhetorical imperialism emphasizes the importance of reading indigenous texts within both their cultural and colonial contexts as well as providing models of such informed readings.
Like the texts by and about the indigenous peoples of the North and South American continents that are the focus of much of the work of Lyons, Powell, and Baca, Kanaka Maoli, or Hawaiian, texts have been similarly underexamined and misunderstood. While there is a significant body of scholarship that locates itself in Hawai'i, much of it is focused on classroom pedagogy and Hawai'i Creole English, the “Pidgin” language that evolved postcontact. Such works are often problematically categorized as “Hawaiian” rather than “of Hawai'i,” highlighting the general lack of understanding of the complicated relationship between Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians who reside in Hawai'i: Morris Young notes, “In Hawai'i you are not Hawaiian as you might be Californian if you lived in or were raised in California” (86). In actuality, there are few scholars who have examined texts by and about Hawaiians or written in the Hawaiian language within a rhetorical frame.

In “Native Claims: Cultural Citizenship, Ethnic Expression, and the Rhetorics of ‘Hawaiianness,’” Young offers such a rhetorical analysis focusing on Hawaiian efforts to reclaim their history and cultural practices since the 1960s. He offers an insightful analysis of these events, situting them as expressions of “cultural citizenship” (to borrow Renato Rosaldo’s term) and then argues that the manifestations of cultural citizenship in this particular context are a precursor to nation-claiming. Young asserts, “Native Hawaiians are enacting cultural citizenship as a starting point for an imagined national citizenship” (99). Because of the overtly hegemonic practices that preceded the 1960s, including the banning of the Hawaiian language, the cultural citizenship he is referring to may indeed be a step toward national citizenship. We suggest, however, that cultural citizenry has traditionally corresponded to national citizenry for Hawaiians. An examination of a specific Hawaiian rhetorical device, kaona, explicates this relationship between cultural citizenry and national citizenry for Hawaiians. The enactment of kaona is deeply cultural; it is an aesthetic appeal and, at the same time, part of a rhetorics of survivance that has been and continues to be employed by Hawaiians since Western contact to assert rhetorical sovereignty, a means of communication essential to national citizenry.

Kaona, often described as a Hawaiian poetic device implying “hidden meaning,” provides a vehicle through which Hawaiians complexify the aesthetic so as to make rhetorical appeals. George Hu’eu Sanford Kanahele describes kaona as a highly developed, multilayered use of metaphor, puns, and allusion, with which ka po'o no'on'o'o, or intellectuals, traditionally composed or passed...
on moʻolelo, or stories and histories (58). Lilikalā K. Kameʻelehiwa further explains kaona in terms of audience in the introduction to her translation of the Kamapuaʻa moʻolelo (a story that overlaps with the Pele-Hiʻiaka moʻolelo). She notes that Hawaiians critically judged poetry and narrative as “sophisticated or simple by the levels of kaona presented” (viii–ix). Additionally, she writes that “there are always several layers of kaona in any good example of Hawaiian prose”: there is the literal meaning; references to the ancient through myths, events, gods, and chiefs; the intertextual use of chants and proverbs; and finally, another possible layer “known only to the raconteur and one or two special members of the audience … while everyone else remains oblivious to the message” (ix). Though not overtly stated, these definitions recognize a dynamic exchange between the composer and the audience that is mediated by the kaona references used by the composer. The composer is expected by Hawaiian audiences to employ kaona, and they know to look for kaona as they hear or read a composition. Kaona demands both an in-depth knowledge of the subject in terms of the audience as well as poetic acumen so as to appeal to the audience’s sense of aesthetic. The kaona the composer employs is thus a direct reflection of his or her knowledge of the targeted audience(s) and a reflection of his or her level of rhetorical skill. Kaona demands both an in-depth knowledge of the subject in terms of the audience as well as poetic acumen so as to appeal to the audience’s sense of aesthetic. The kaona the composer employs is thus a direct reflection of his or her knowledge of the targeted audience(s) and a reflection of his or her level of rhetorical skill. The complexity involved in creating and deciphering kaona has resulted in it being traditionally regarded as a “skill to be honored at the highest level and an indication of one’s intelligence” (Pukui, Haertig, and Lee 42) that is at once both aesthetic and rhetorical.

The expected role of the Hawaiian audience in this exchange is to look for and detect kaona in a composition so as to relate the numerous and varied allusions to their prior knowledge and experiences. In effect, those audience members who find the kaona and its meaning(s) are rewarded with a sense of exclusivity shared between the composer and all who “find” the “hidden meaning,” thereby receiving the “insider” knowledge embedded within a composition. If the composer has skillfully crafted the kaona (as demanded by the audience), those audience members who are the most knowledgeable of the kaona’s subject would find the most layers of meaning. Reflective of the ‘ōlelo noʻeau, or proverb, “Ma ka hana ka ‘ike,” or “In the work is the knowledge,” great value is placed on the intellectual work expended in crafting and deciphering this fluid and complex form of communication. Kaona can thus be understood
as a Hawaiian intellectual tradition honed through the interchange between composer and audience.

In this article, we examine kaona in classical and contemporary mo’olelo within the frame of Powell’s rhetorics of survivance and Lyons’s rhetorical sovereignty to show ways this device has been and continues to be employed as an aesthetic standard employed as an aesthetic standard as well as a call for resistance, and how it is a means of both cultural and national citizenry. Specifically, we discuss kaona references to the classical religious tradition of the Pele-Hi’iaka mo’olelo in Queen Lili’uokalani’s autobiography Hawai‘i’s Story by Hawai‘i’s Queen (1898) and Haunani-Kay Trask’s poetry collection Night Is A Sharkskin Drum (2002). This analysis of kaona illuminates the complex and diverse ways rhetoric has been and continues to be deployed in an indigenous cultural context; specifically, we show how the creation and use of kaona furthers decolonization efforts by providing a means of ancestral reconnection and historical retrieval, and how kaona is an expression of rhetorical survivance and sovereignty.

**Creation after Destruction: Understanding Kaona References to the Pele-Hi’iaka Mo’olelo**

Some basic background of the classical Pele-Hi’iaka mo’olelo is necessary to understand the various kaona references made in both Lili’uokalani’s autobiography and Trask’s poetry, though what we offer here is by no means all encompassing. Aloha and reverence for Pele abound, as is evident through the “vast repository of chants, songs, poetry, dance and narrative recorded in a myriad of oral and written traditions” that continue to be produced (ho’omanawanui viii). This repository ranges from the classical to the contemporary. Within the classical, there are multiple versions of the Pele-Hi’iaka mo’olelo with different characters, events, and places visited. John Charlot surmises this multiplicity happened as the mo’olelo spread among Hawaiians, who “add[ed] their own interests, themes, and motifs to [Pele’s] growing literature. This spreading is typical of movements in classical Hawai‘i and demonstrates the mutual influence of all parts of society” (57). Moreover, as is apparent from the eight different Hawaiian-language newspapers published during 1861–1928 that included Pele-Hi’iaka mo’olelo (ho’omanawanui x), Hawaiians wrote multiple versions of the mo’olelo to rhetorically resist colonial encroachment. Despite the differences in the versions, there are some common elements in the various Pele-Hi’iaka mo’olelo that we can share.
Pele and Hi‘iakaikapiopele (Hi‘iaka in the Bosom of Pele) are the divine daughters of Haumea, a goddess who gave birth to gods out of every part of her body. Pele was born “as a flame in [her] mouth” (Kame‘elehiwa, Wāhine 39), while Hi‘iakaikapiopele was also born from her mouth but in egg form (30). Hi‘iakaikapiopele is Pele’s favorite sister because Pele carried her when she was still in egg form from Kahiki, the ancestral land. Pele, as the volcano goddess, creates land. Her passionate nature and emotions drive her to both violence and love, which manifest in the flow and eruptions of the volcano Kīlauea, Pele’s home. Hi‘iakaikapiopele is the goddess who greens the earth after the lava has cooled. Pualani Kanaka‘ole Kanahele, who traces her mo‘okū‘auhau (genealogy) from Pele, affirms that both Pele and Hi‘iakaikapiopele are “necessary in the cycle of destruction and regeneration that gives life to the Hawaiian Islands. Both are necessary for the growth of the land” (xii). Because the mo‘olelo and the undeniable forces associated with Pele and Hi‘iaka are so well known by Kanaka Maoli, all mo‘olelo relating to the sisters work as powerful metaphors for the potential of life after destruction. While contemporary Western audiences are arguably familiar with Pele as a destructive force due to colonial depictions, this is only half of the story. The mo‘olelo show Pele’s destruction is always followed by Hi‘iaka’s regeneration; thus, the sisters are complementary forces that create life.

The most famous Pele and Hi‘iaka mo‘olelo details Hi‘iaka’s journey from Hawai‘i island to fetch Pele’s lover, Lohi‘au, on Kaua‘i. The mo‘olelo begins as Pele feels sleepy. She asks Hi‘iaka to watch over her body and instructs Hi‘iaka to wake her if she sleeps for too long. While in her dream state, Pele follows the sound of a drum to the island of Kaua‘i, where she meets and falls in love with Lohi‘au, a skilled hula dancer. After several days, Hi‘iaka awakens Pele, who then asks Hi‘iaka to go to Kaua‘i to bring Lohi‘au to her. Hi‘iaka agrees but asks Pele to promise to care for Ho-poe, her lehua grove and dear friend. Over the course of Hi‘iaka’s journey throughout the islands on her way to Kaua‘i and back, she must rely on her ability to craft prayers and chants to access her mana wahine, or sacred feminine power and inherent authority, which by its very nature is, in part, sexual.

The mo‘olelo depicts Hi‘iaka’s coming of age as a goddess and includes several instances of her outsmarting, overpowering, slaying, humiliating, pardoning, and healing men and women, as well as powerful male and female mo‘o, or giant lizard-like creatures. When she returns to Hawai‘i with Lohi‘au, however, Hi‘iaka finds that Pele, in a jealous rage, destroyed Hōpoe. Angered,
Hi‘iaka takes Lohi‘au as her own lover. Pele kills Lohi‘au, and a battle ensues between the two sisters, wherein Pele finds that Hi‘iaka has power to nearly match her own. A truce is eventually called between them, and though Pele keeps her position as head of the family, Hi‘iaka is recognized as playing a powerful role in the creation of land.

A version of this mo‘olelo was first recorded in the written word as “He Moolelo no Hiiakaikapoliopele” by M. J. Kapihenui in the Hawaiian newspaper Ka Hoku o ka Pakipika in 1861. Ka Hoku o ka Pakipika was created because missionary newspapers censored Native Hawaiian mele and mo‘olelo, which were often deemed “obscene” for their use of sexual kaona. Thus, “He Moolelo o Hiiakaikapoliopele,” which ran in serial from December 26, 1861, through July 17, 1862, represents a prime site of rhetorical sovereignty, as it makes frequent use of kaona, particularly sexual kaona, and humor to resist the “missionary discourse that disparaged Kanaka culture and worked to disempower Kanaka politically” (Silva, Aloha 72). While missionaries brought writing to Hawai‘i and sought to exercise control over it, Hawaiians effectively used writing to assure the continued survival of their culture and express their resistance. Interestingly enough, it was through the printing of mele, or songs, and mo‘olelo during this time period that it was realized that sexual kaona was especially difficult for missionary/haole audiences to read and understand. Thus, despite the colonial settlers’ literacy in the Hawaiian language and an awareness that “mele often contained metaphorical or figurative language, [they] were unable to understand the ‘real’ meaning. . . . [Kaona then became a tool] to communicate to the masses of ka‘naka without detection by the haole missionary community” (Kaiwi 13). Kaona’s political potential as code quickly spread among Hawaiians, who employed these “veiled references” to “create and maintain national solidarity against colonial maneuvers . . . [because] without knowledge of the cultural codes in Hawaiian, foreigners who understood the language could still be counted on to miss the kaona” (Silva, Aloha 8).

Colonial censorship and Kanaka Maoli resistance was still evident in 1905, when Ho‘oulumāzhiehiehie published his version of the Pele-Hi‘iaka mo‘olelo in the newspaper Ka Na‘i Aupuni. He writes of the need for coding for both aesthetic and political purposes: “Whereas this is an era that fancies ladylike and gentlemanly manners, bound by the tentacles of law that command angelic wording for distribution in the newspapers, the writer, therefore, dons the cloak of riddles at this point” (Ho‘oulumāzhiehiehie 373). In this way, Hawaiian intellectuals of the nineteenth century, such as Kapihenui and Ho‘oulumāzhiehiehie, served
a critical role in Hawaiian resistance and rhetorical sovereignty by providing counternarratives to the colonial project by recording mo’olelo reflecting a highly literate and poetic culture through displays of kaona (Kaiwi 7–8). Thus, contemporary kaona references to the Pele-Hi’iaka mo’olelo also allude to the mo’olelo’s retelling as a resistance strategy. However, despite continued Native Hawaiian resistance, censorship and colonial silencing persisted—but then again, so did mana wahine, Pele, and Hi’iakaikapiopele, as the growing corpus of Pele-Hi’iaka mo’olelo illustrates.

In the next two sections, we examine kaona references to Pele-Hi’iaka mo’olelo in an excerpt from Queen Lili’uokalani’s autobiography and a poem by Haunani-Kay Trask. These analyses illustrate the ways that in practice and content, kaona has been used to unite and teach Hawaiians, as well as promote decolonization, and, thus, how it functions as an assertion of rhetorical sovereignty.

**Kaona in English: Queen Lili’uokalani Retells Kapi’olani’s “Defiance” of Pele**

After American businessmen illegally seized her kingdom and overthrew the monarchical government, and she was placed under house arrest, Queen Lili’uokalani began petitioning to have the Hawaiian nation reinstated through appeals to President Grover Cleveland and the American people. The queen’s autobiography, *Hawai’i’s Story by Hawai’i’s Queen*, published in 1898, is an attempt by Hawai’i’s last reigning monarch to tell the American people her account of the events that led up to the illegal overthrow. That one of the intended audiences of her book is the American people is evidenced in the concluding chapter when she addresses them repeatedly with “Oh honest Americans” (373) and acknowledges that she must supply background for the “American general reader” (366). However, a close reading suggests that this book does more than speak to an American audience.

At the time of the writing, the queen’s words and movements were still heavily monitored, and she was unable to speak freely to her people. Paulo Freire and Donald Macedo write that under these conditions, the colonized must “denounce through artistic expression and sometimes hide their denunciation with artistic expression” (138). It is more than likely that the queen used her autobiography as a means to deliver messages to her people, specifically by employing kaona. Previous works analyzing the queen’s mele (Silva, “Kū‘ē!”; Nordstrom) have noted that the queen frequently employed kaona
using Hawaiian words with multiple meanings so as to present less political meanings to readers with limited knowledge of the Hawaiian language, primarily non-Native speakers. In what follows, we look at how the queen, writing under specific rhetorical constraints—she was censored and under constant threat—employs *kaona*, but in English, in the retelling of the famous Kapiʻolani-Pele story. She relies on her people’s knowledge of the Pele tradition to deliver messages of resistance while appealing to the values of a Western audience, a strategy common in a rhetorics of survivance.

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A gifted composer, author, and avid diary writer, Queen Liliʻuokalani was also a master rhetorician in both the Hawaiian and English traditions. Throughout *Hawaiʻi's Story by Hawaiʻi's Queen*, she alludes to canonized English texts and employs traditional Western rhetorical strategies using the Euro-American value system as a basis to appeal to what seems to be her only intended audience, a white American audience. One of the book’s purposes is surely to inform the American people about the injustice of the overthrow. To accomplish this, Liliʻuokalani had to write in a way that would be respected by Westerners. She was very aware of how she had been portrayed in the American media—from a laughable savage caricature to an exotic, sensuous temptress—and worked to counter these images through language and experiences that embodied Western values. She writes: “With few exceptions, the press has seemed to favor the extinction of Hawaiian sovereignty. . . . It has often treated me with coarse allusions and flippancy, and almost uniformly commented upon me adversely” (370–71). In order to present an image contradictory to the one presented by the press, Liliʻuokalani knew she had to appear highly educated and cultured to her American audience, as befitting their idea of a queen.

While writing her autobiography, the queen was also actively trying to have the monarchy reinstated by the U.S. government. To appear aggressive and confrontational would not only seem unbefitting a queen but would also subvert her ultimate purpose: to persuade the American people to restore Hawaiʻi’s sovereignty. She knew she would be prohibited from being frank about her anger toward the American businessmen who had taken control over the Hawaiian
government. She would also have to be careful about using any language that might be perceived as encouraging the Hawaiian people to rebel against the illegal government. If she openly advocated rebellion, the Americans would have the perfect excuse to take up “the White Man’s Burden.” The queen thus negotiated a complex rhetorical situation wherein she employed the values of her American audiences to promote the sovereignty of her nation and its people.

To complicate matters, when Lili‘uokalani was first placed under arrest in 1895, her residence had been “overhauled . . . without other results than the abstraction of many memorandums” (Lili‘uokalani 272). Thus, because everything she wrote was being scrutinized and censored, the queen knew that if she wanted to convey any messages to her people she would have to do so using kaona. Kaona allowed the Queen to rely on the collective knowledge of her people and, through allusion to significant cultural traditions, to tell them things she knew her American audience did not know. In other words, we contend that the queen wrote two different themes into her autobiography for different rhetorical purposes: 1) to provide a version of the events that led up to and followed the overthrow that countered the colonial narrative in order to gain the American people’s support for her efforts to regain Hawaiian sovereignty; and 2) to offer hope to her Hawaiian readers by sending messages of resistance and unity as well as to reaffirm her resolve to restore the Hawaiian Kingdom. To accomplish this, kaona would have to be imbedded in a foreign language, English. There is arguably no stronger example of “using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house” than writing in the colonizers’ language to covertly advocate resistance while simultaneously appealing for support from the colonizers.

The Queen begins her story with a recitation of her abbreviated mo‘okū‘auhau, or genealogy, which, in addition to establishing her rightful claim to the throne through her ancestry, adheres to an important Hawaiian tradition evoked in order to introduce oneself. In observing this protocol, Lili‘uokalani shares her genealogical ties to Kapi‘olani, while also establishing her intimate familial knowledge of the story about Kapi‘olani and Pele. Aside from being celebrated as one of the first converts to Christianity, Kapi‘olani was also the

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first chiefess to descend into Kīlauea volcano to denounce Pele as a god. For these reasons, Kap'iōlani was widely upheld as an example of Christian propriety and devoutness by missionaries in their conversion efforts (Silva, “Kū‘ē” 5). Establishing her close familial relationship to Kapi'olani, whom, because of these associations with Christianity, her American audience would deem respectable, and retelling the story of how her great-aunt defied Pele affords Lili‘uokalani a great deal of creditability with this audience. For Hawaiian audiences who did not question the queen's ethos and were knowledgeable of Kapi'olani, however, the Queen's particular retelling of the mo'olelo would have signaled her efforts to send them messages through kaona.

Next the queen describes how her great-aunt “broke forever the power of Pele, the fire-goddess, over the hearts of her people” (2). She writes that Kapi'olani “plucked the sacred berries from the borders of the volcano, descended to the boiling lava, and there while singing Christian hymns, threw them into the lake of fire” (1). The way this passage is written suggests that Kapi'olani's act had significance within the Pele tradition and opposed rather than glorified the god. However, it is important to note that at this juncture the queen offers no explanation of the significance of throwing the “sacred berries” into the “lake of fire,” nor does she mention the significance of the berries themselves. The berries to which she refers are undoubtedly ‘ohelo berries, which are, according to the Pele religious tradition, sacred to Pele.

On the surface, the Queen seems to be emphasizing to her Christian readers how her family not only embraced Christianity but also aided in the denouncement of the traditional Hawaiian religion. The Pele tradition is frequently understood to be in opposition to Christianity and a symbol of archaic Hawaiian religious practices, often deemed as mere mythology. As Pele symbolizes the dynamic nature of the volcano—powerful, undeniable, untamed, and raw—when Kapi'olani opposes Pele, Pele's power becomes a part of the pagan past that is harnessed in the face of Christianity. Thus, it is through her implied irreverence to Pele that Kapi'olani proclaims the dominance of Christianity.

Liliʻuokalani is, arguably, doing more with this passage than showing herself to be a good Christian woman whose relative helped to dispel belief in Pele. It is no accident that this passage is on the first page of the book, for, if successful, kaona here would cue the Hawaiian reader to look for layers of kaona in passages throughout the text. In order to accomplish this, the kaona would have to be subtle, unrecognizable on a quick read to any but those learned in Hawaiian tradition. If the queen wished to deliver messages of resistance to
her people, there is no better tradition with which to employ kaona than the Pele tradition. While Kapi‘olani’s actions are seen to challenge the force represented by Pele, with Christianity proving to be more powerful, Pele was known to be among the strongest of “heathen” gods to remain. These religious forces collide in the Kapi‘olani-Pele story, which has a particularly strong rhetorical impact because the religions represent two opposing political factions—those wanting to maintain sovereignty for Hawai‘i and those wanting annexation to the United States. Peter Kerry Powers asserts that “religions of various kinds . . . provide resources for all manner of political action” because of their ability to evoke cultural memories of the strength once embodied by a dispossessed community (1). The queen could be sure the Pele tradition represented a source of strength to her people, and because of the purposes the mo‘olelo had served for generations, she knew it could be used as a call to action.

In the short recant of how Queen Kapi‘olani defies Pele, Lili‘uokalani says that Kapi‘olani “plucked the sacred berries from the borders of the volcano, descended to the boiling lava, and there while singing Christian hymns, threw them into the lake of fire” (1). What is most interesting about this passage is that Kapi‘olani’s action of throwing berries into the volcano is typical of the way offerings are made to Pele. Queen Lili‘uokalani is aware of this because, although she does not explain the actions in any detail in the opening chapter, she does explain ways in which Pele is worshipped later in the book. She describes how retainers in her entourage paid homage to Pele:

They [members of her party descending to the volcano] were all provided with some offerings to Pele. . . . Those born in foreign lands, tourists who scarcely know our ancient history, generally take to the brink some coin or other trinket which, for good luck. . . . they cast into the lava. Our people, the Native Hawaiians, have no money to throw away or such souvenirs of the past but they carry wreaths of the pandanus flower . . . and garlands of nature’s ornaments, which are tossed into the angry waves of the basin. (72)

Clearly, Lili‘uokalani knows that ‘tossing nature’s ornaments’ into the fiery lake is not only a way to worship Pele, but also a practice known to Kānaka Maoli and tourists alike.

This begs the question: how exactly is Kapi‘olani defying Pele through her actions as they are described on the opening page of the book? Rather than denouncing the power of Pele, in Lili‘uokalani’s version of the story Kapi‘olani honors Pele by making a religious offering of “sacred berries,” a subtlety Hawaiians could be counted on to recognize. Thus, in her retelling of the story,
Lili‘uokalani is, in fact, advocating that the untamable force Pele represents, which symbolizes the overthrow in the balance of nature, be fed; she is telling her people to draw on their cultural sovereignty—to nourish Hawaiian traditions, to be strong, to resist—so as to fight for their national sovereignty.

The missionary W. D. Westervelt provides an alternative account of the Kapi‘olani-Pele story. It is significant to note that Westervelt’s rhetorical purpose in the telling is to promote Christianity and denounce Hawaiian religious practices. He writes that Kapi‘olani’s purpose was to “defy Pele” (160) and that “[t]he influence of Kapi‘olani against this most influential form of idolatrous worship was felt throughout the whole [Hawaiian] nation” (161). In Westervelt’s version, Kapi‘olani overtly opposed Pele and remained unharmed, which, for him and other missionaries, proves the powerlessness of the Hawaiian god. Westervelt’s version conveys a witness’s account of Kapi‘olani’s act of defiance: “She also ate the berries consecrated to Pele and threw stones into the volcano,” actions that are contrasted with the way Pele was worshipped as is evidenced by the “man whose duty it was to feed Pele [by throwing] berries and the like into the volcano” (qtd. in Westervelt 160–61). Kapi‘olani’s actions as described by Westervelt are an act of defiance against the Pele tradition, whereas throwing berries into the volcano are not.

Westervelt’s account suggests that missionaries were aware of how Pele is worshipped, and Lili‘uokalani suggests even tourists know the ritual. So why would the queen rely on a manipulation of Kapi‘olani’s actions—changing them from defiance (Westervelt’s term) to worship—to deliver a message to her people when it is likely that many would be aware of the error? There are several possible explanations. The queen knew she wasn’t taken seriously by many Americans, settlers in Hawai‘i and those who lived on the continent alike. She may have relied on the prevailing stereotypes of the day, thinking that anyone noticing the error would attribute it to a lack in her writing sophistication. She may have also operated under the supposition that even if they noticed how she had misrepresented the act of defiance toward Pele, because of the American disdain for Hawaiian tradition and perception that worship of the Hawaiian god correlated with idolatry, little attention would be given to the possible power behind what seems to be a mistake. Another possibility
might be that the queen just didn’t expect many Americans who resided in Hawai‘i to actually read her book. Moreover, desperate times call for desperate measures, and the queen may have used the only tools available to her, kaona and a shared cultural memory, to deliver her message.

Although Lili‘uokalani’s continued efforts to regain sovereignty for Hawai‘i were not realized during her lifetime, her fight has been taken up by the generations of Hawaiians who have followed her, who continue to use kaona to reaffirm cultural and national sovereignty. Among the most notable is Haunani-Kay Trask, contemporary poet, scholar, and political activist, who has led the Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement for the past two decades.

**E Pele ʻē: Haunani-Kay Trask and the Poetics of Resistance**

Haunani-Kay Trask is one of the most well-known voices in the Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement. She has written two books of scholarship, *Eros and Power: The Promise of Feminist Theory* (1986) and *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai‘i* (1993), as well as two books of poetry, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen* (1994) and *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* (2002). She is an activist, scholar, professor, and poet representing the strong and vibrant force with which Kanaka Maoli continue to subvert and combat American colonialism, a system Trask views as predicated on the “the constant erosion of a people’s self-respect through a colonization of the mind and the elegant spirit that once sustained it” (“Writing” 19), with counternarratives of rhetorical sovereignty. These narratives place Hawaiians “at the center of the creative endeavor…. The focus is not on that which is Haole, or foreign, but on that which Hawaiians value: the land, the sea, the people, and their intimate relationships” (Trask, “Decolonizing” 173). Much of this work is done by invoking shared ancestral memory through classical mo‘olelo, which Trask sees as being “central to the decolonization of all Native literatures” (167). In her poetry collections, Trask, like Lili‘uokalani, employs kaona references to the Pele-Hi‘iaka mo‘olelo to continue the Kanaka Maoli call for resistance against American colonialism. Also similar to the queen, one of the ways Trask establishes her ethos as a leader is by sharing her mo‘okū ‘auhau, at once adhering to traditional Hawaiian protocol and asserting rhetorical sovereignty by setting the parameters of how her ethos should be judged.

As part of her author’s biography in her first poetry collection, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*, Trask offers her mo‘okū ‘auhau before all other biographical information as she does in most of her books. She writes that she is “descended
of the Piʻilani line of Maui and the Kahakumakalua line of Kauaʻi” (np). Together her lineages convey significant information about who she is and where she came from—her ancestors and the lands to which she is connected. Both ancestors she names are renowned aliʻi nui, or high chiefs. Kahakumakalua was the aliʻi nui of Kauaʻi. Through this lineage, Trask is also descended from Kavelomahamahaia, whom Abraham Fornander notes as being “one of the great kings of Kauaʻi under whom the country prospered, peace prevailed, and population and wealth increased” (292). Piʻilani is similarly among the most celebrated aliʻi nui of Maui because of the many significant achievements under his rule, including the unification of Maui and Ke Ala Loa, or the first roads project.10 Piʻilani’s kinship with the reigning chiefly families of Oʻahu and Hawaiʻi combined with the acts of Piʻilani’s government, “brought Maui up to a political consideration in the group which it never had enjoyed before, and which it retained until the conquest by Kamehameha I” over a century later (87).

From the Kanaka Maoli perspective, genealogies represent, as Kameʻeleihiwa writes, “the sum total of our identity” (Native 21). To those familiar with the genealogies of the aliʻi of various islands, Kahakumakalua and Piʻilani would signify Trask’s descent from among the greatest of aliʻi, under whose rule the lands and the people in their care prospered. Through these lineages, Trask’s ethos as a leader among Kanaka Maoli is established in part through the mana, or authority, afforded her from her ancestors, as “genealogies are a means of glorifying one’s ancestors and one’s past. If the ancestors are glorious, so too are the descendants” (21). In Trask’s case, because her ancestors are well known for bringing prosperity to their chiefdoms, her moʻokūʻauhau also emphasizes traditional Hawaiian standards of successful leadership based on the well-being of the common people. Thus, Trask’s descent from successful Hawaiian leaders reminds Hawaiian audiences of these traditional standards against which to critique the American colonial governance under which Hawaiians have generally not fared well, with Kanaka Maoli suffering the highest rates per capita of poverty, homelessness, incarceration, and alcohol and drug abuse. In exercising rhetorical sovereignty, Trask establishes a Hawaiian context through which she sets the parameters of Hawaiian leadership by adhering to traditional models that question the success of colonial leadership; simultaneously, she creates a space for herself as a strong Hawaiian leader who is expected to speak and write in ways that promote cultural and national sovereignty, which she does through her poetics of resistance.

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a space for herself as a strong Hawaiian leader who is expected to speak and write in ways that promote cultural and national sovereignty, which she does through her poetics of resistance. However, even Trask’s readers who may not be aware of the accomplishments of her ancestors would still understand how the performance of mo’oku-‘auhau is an observance of a distinctly indigenous protocol of introducing oneself and confirms Trask’s deep roots within Hawai‘i. Therefore, both Native and settler audiences receive Trask’s poetics within the context of this mo’oku-‘auhau and the ethos that both its content and telling demonstrate.

Unlike Lili‘uokalani’s nineteenth-century audiences, who could be expected to “get” the ironies of Christian rhetoric and veiled Hawaiian rhetoric through kaona, Trask’s contemporary audiences, both settlers and Natives, have experienced over a century of firmly entrenched American colonialism in Hawai‘i. Since annexation, Hawai‘i went from territorial status to statehood. Those in Hawai‘i have been subjected to a long and pervasive Americanization campaign emphasizing “American” ideals of democracy, freedom, and liberty alongside the “American dream.” These American ideals have been largely unfulfilled for Hawaiians, however, as they have coincided with Hawaiian dispossession of land, cultural practices, language, and history, and with the proliferation of racist stereotypes of Hawaiians as lazy, illiterate, criminal, and incapable of self-governance. Trask’s audiences, of course, diverge insofar as they identify themselves as Native, settler, or tourist within Hawai‘i’s colonial parameters, with settlers and tourists having significantly less knowledge of Hawaiian culture and mo‘olelo. This is precisely why Trask can be assured that kaona references to the Pele–Hi‘iaka mo‘olelo will be understood by a primarily Hawaiian audience. In contrast, settler and tourist audiences, though able to detect themes of resistance, can be counted on to miss the arguments for resistance Trask transmits via kaona. Powell asserts that inherent to a rhetorics of survivance is the Native awareness of the colonial ideologies intended to “remove, reserve, assimilate, acculturate, abrogate, and un-see us,” which can be exploited, overturned, challenged, and used as rhetorical artillery. Trask’s poetics accomplish this by highlighting the irony of American patriotic ideals in Hawai‘i. At the same time, she dispels stereotypes of Hawaiians by situating her poetics within a long literary tradition of Hawaiian intellectualism that predates Western contact. She also privileges Hawaiian
cultural practices, as is exemplified in her deployment of kaona references to traditional belief systems (embodied in Hawaiian moʻolelo, especially the Pele-Hiʻiaka moʻolelo), which combine to act as a mode of resistance and to embody rhetorical sovereignty.

Trask’s second poetic collection, *Night Is a Sharkskin Drum*, comprises three parts. The first section, “Born in Fire,” presents five poems that reference the Pele-Hiʻiaka moʻolelo in terms of resistance. Rather than the akua of these moʻolelo existing only in a distant Hawaiian past, Trask depicts Pele, Hiʻiaka, and their powerful relatives as living in the contemporary world, resistant to colonialism and threatening to “[devour] the foreigner” (7). In turn, the second section, “A Fragrance of Devouring,” exposes American and Japanese tourism in Hawai‘i as “devouring” Kanaka Maoli through cultural exploitation. The collection concludes with the final section, “Chants of Dawn,” which largely emphasizes cultural renewal and reawakening, especially through the erotic or sexual, commonly used in traditional Hawaiian moʻolelo to emphasize the relationship between procreation and creation. Certainly, the collection can be classified as having strong themes of resistance in its assertions of rhetorical sovereignty, emphasizing a return to tradition and culture through Trask’s kaona references to the Pele-Hiʻiaka moʻolelo.

The poem for which the collection is named, “Night Is a Sharkskin Drum,” marks a prime example. The first stanza of the poem portrays a return to the “Night” or Po-, traditionally seen as the ancient time of the Hawaiian gods (as depicted in the *Kumulipo*11). The poem begins,

> Night is a sharkskin drum  
> Sounding our bodies black  
> and gold.

The “sharkskin drum” that “sound[s]” is identified as “Night”; however, this stanza also serves as a reference to the drum beat that calls Pele in her dream state to Kaua‘i, where she finds Lohi‘au, who is to be her lover. Following Pele’s example, and at Trask’s urging, then, Hawaiians are called toward the sound of the drum, which transfixes and transforms. “Night” or Pō, a pan-Polynesian concept, is the ultimate source of creation and the very origin of the gods and ʻāina. Using the English “Night” to reference this concept, Trask asserts that a return to Pō is powerful enough to “[sound their] bodies black and gold,” a transformation in union with Pō itself.

The next two stanzas frame the entrance of Pele, as
All is aflame
the uplands a shush
of wind.

From Halema‘uma‘u
our fiery Akua comes

These images evoke the experience of being in the presence of the lava flow, as they describe the wind that blows harshly near the uplands of Kīlauea, wind that in Trask's depiction “shush[es]” all other sound. This silence anticipates the arrival of Pele, who emerges from Halema‘uma‘u, the primary vent of Kīlauea and also Pele's house. Out of reverence for Pele, Trask capitalizes the word Akua (translated as “god” or a “chief of high rank”), rather than leaving it lowercase as akua. Since Ka Palapala Hemoolele, or the Bible, was translated into Hawaiian and printed by missionaries during 1822–1839, generally the capitalized Akua has only been used in written form in reference to the Christian God (Ke Akua). Trask's reappropriation of this word, then, is significant, as it usurps this title from the Christian God and bestows it upon Pele, underscoring where Trask's reverence and loyalty lie as well as illustrating rhetorical use of religious concepts in terms of survivance.

The poem closes with the following oli, or chant, which announces Pele's arrival:

\[ E, \text{Pele } e, \]
\[ E, \text{Pele } e, \]
\[ E, \text{Pele } e, (5) \]

The repetition of these lines in the oli, which are used in traditional mele performed in honor of Pele, in effect serve to build the mana of the words while also welcoming her presence, which is at once intended to be threatening to those who do not afford Pele reverence (i.e., settlers, tourists) and those who do (i.e., Hawaiians who have not entirely discounted traditional cultural beliefs in service of Christianity). The use of the ū (shown italicized in the original without the diacriticals) following Pele's name denotes tremendous respect and affection for her, as it serves to emphasize her name.

The refrain also references the oli hoʻūla, a chant intended to awaken a sleeper, that Hiʻiaka uses to awaken Pele from her dream journey. In the chant,
“E Pele ē” is repeated eight times and coupled with short descriptions of the waking world designed to remind Pele of her divine responsibilities. For example, Pele is reminded that she must return, as “E Pele ē” precedes “Uhi, uha mai ana oe!” (You are erupting), meaning the volcano is erupting. The series of “E Pele ē” that comprise Hiʻiaka’s oli hoʻāla closes with the line “E Pele ē! E ala mai ‘oe!” (Pele! Wake up!), after which Pele awakens. Understood within the context of Trask’s well-documented efforts to exercise and promote rhetorical sovereignty, her kaona reference to Hiʻiaka’s oli hoʻāla acts as a call for a political “awakening” among Kānaka Maoli. The Hawaiian word for awakening is ala; however, the word ala also means “to rise up, arise, get up, come forward,” as in “Ala kūʻe,” which means “to rise in revolt.” Privileging Hawaiian akua such as Pele and Hiʻiaka by upholding them as ancestral and divine cultural models who embody the ‘āina, therefore, furthers Trask’s calls for Kanaka Maoli resistance against colonialism.

Moreover, the poem “Night Is a Sharkskin Drum” also praises the power of Pele in form (pele is also the Hawaiian word for “lava”) by physically embodying the flow of her lava. The poem consists of just eleven lines structured into six stanzas. The first two stanzas contain three lines each, the third stanza has two lines, and the final three stanzas are all just one line each. Together, these lines advance, beginning at the top left corner and moving farther and farther right as they slope down the page. The line placement echoes the movement of pāhōehoe, or smooth and unbroken lava that typically advances in “tongues” that continually break out from a billow of congealing surface crust. Pāhōehoe forms a smooth, undulating, or ropy surface, an appearance that defies their relatively fast movement and is reflective of Pele’s power to destroy. In Ho’oulumāhiehie’s version of the Pele-Hiʻiaka moʻolelo, Lohi’au is killed by a pāhōehoe flow (Ho’oulumāhiehie 373). Trask’s mirroring of pāhōehoe through her organization and arrangement of the poem has a similar effect, as her simple and flowing lineation belies the imminent, fire-churned meaning within the kaona she employs. Her words are intended to destroy colonialism even as they are intended to create a space for Hawaiian sovereignty. This veneration of the land through Pele and Hiʻiaka is critical to rhetorical sovereignty, which, as Lyons writes, “[refuses] to disassociate culture, identity, and power from the land” and disavows the colonial concept of land “as private property or purely exploitable resource” (457–58). Trask demonstrates that land, culture, and community are similarly inseparable within the Hawaiian culture, using Pele and Hiʻiaka as both embodiments of land and models of resistance for herself.
Like Pele, Trask is unafraid to display her outrage and to fight against those who wrong her or her people. Like Hi'iaka, she uses the power of her words and her intelligence, as demonstrated by her deft use of kaona references to the Pele-Hi'iaka mo'olelo, to heal her people and challenge the colonial agenda. And, like both Pele and Hi'iaka, Trask is still here, still creating.

Conclusion

A precolonial religion embodying sustained power, as the Pele-Hi'iaka tradition does, provides a platform for exercising rhetorical sovereignty and survivance because religion creates a sense of unity in its shared practices and stories and thereby reaffirms group identity. Kanaka Maoli have continually called upon the Pele-Hi'iaka tradition in part because of its ability to evoke shared cultural memories that precede Western contact and the power such evocation potentiates. In messages of resistance, “cultural memories . . . emphasize the possibility of collective action” (Powers 12–13). Trask, like Lili‘uokalani before her, recognizes that the Pele-Hi‘iaka mo‘olelo represents a strong cultural and religious force for Hawaiians and is a potent rhetorical tool to exercise rhetorical sovereignty.

For Kānaka Maoli, the themes of resistance and mana wahine, as well as the regeneration of life after destruction in the Pele-Hi‘iaka mo‘olelo, continue to articulate a sense of hope through a return to cultural tradition, perhaps signaling why it has been continuously returned to by Kanaka Maoli orators and writers, as well as by Kanaka Maoli readers, for generations. Moreover, nineteenth-century and contemporary kaona references to the mo‘olelo, such as those in Lili‘uokalani’s autobiography and Trask’s poetry, confirm that kaona continues not only as a vital part of the Native Hawaiian aesthetic and intellectual tradition but also as a rhetorical tool that is used epistemologically to reaffirm culture and create a sense of unity among Hawaiians, important in any decolonization movement. In turn, the continued popularity of Pele-Hi‘iaka mo‘olelo is testament to its ongoing cultural relevance, offering protocols for how the ‘āina and Kānaka Maoli should be treated and governed; potent models for various means of warranted resistance in the face of unjust rule; and vibrant symbols of cultural pride and revitalization amid colonialism. Both Lili‘uokalani’s and Trask’s kaona references to Pele-Hi‘iaka mo‘olelo illustrate how discourses of resistance and renewal continue as expressions of Hawaiian rhetorical sovereignty.
As creators of ʻāina, or land, both Pele and Hiʻiaka represent ancestors whose powers continue to be felt. Pele and Hiʻiaka are tangible gods who make their presence known in the ʻāina’s many manifestations. One can journey to Kālauea and feel the heat emanating from Pele’s lake of fire while standing on Halemaʻumaʻu’s crater edge; walk over old street signs and roads engulfed in cooled lava; and see the new growth of ferns pushing their way through the hardened basalt. The continuity of Pele-Hiʻiaka moʻolelo also demonstrate the Hawaiian people’s continuing reverence and aloha for Pele and Hiʻiaka and exemplify the staunch survivance of a colonized land and its people. Kānaka Maoli continue to call upon Pele and Hiʻiaka in their literary and political works in the fight against colonialism and its ideologies because this moʻolelo shows that they and their ʻāina can be healed.

Notes

1. North America’s indigenous peoples continue to reside in conditions that are neither colonial, postcolonial, nor neocolonial, but what Gerald Vizenor calls “paracolonial,” a “colonialism beyond colonialism” that is “multiple, contradictory” and seemingly ongoing (77).

2. Throughout this article, we use the terms “Kanaka Maoli,” “Hawaiian” and “Native Hawaiian” interchangeably to refer to the indigenous people of Hawai‘i. “Kānaka Maoli” (with the macron) indicates the plural version of this term.

3. Diacritical marks, such as the kahakō (macron) and the ʻokina (glottal stop) were not used in Hawaiian writing until Mary Kawena Pukuʻi and Samuel Elbert compiled the first Hawaiian Dictionary in 1957. Thus, all quoted texts written prior to 1957 did not have diacritical marks. In all instances, we choose to honor texts as they were originally written.

4. In Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism, Noenoe Silva elaborates on how Native Hawaiians discovered that sexual kaona could be used as code through the example of Puni Maʻemaʻe, who wrote an editorial letter against a mele praising education, which used lovemaking as a metaphor (66).

5. Haole means “foreign” or “foreigner” in Hawaiian but has come to refer to “white” or “American” or “European” in contemporary usage.

6. There is likely much more kaona in the Queen’s telling of this particular story than we discuss here. However, the intention is not to imply a comprehensive understanding of all that Liliʻuokalani wished to convey in her writing but to demonstrate how kaona can be used.

7. Arguably, Liliʻuokalani’s publisher may also have had something to do with her tempering her tone. The book was published in 1898 by Lothrop, Lee & Shepard,
a Boston firm. The queen may have secured the help of this publishing company through an association with her late husband John Dominis, whose family still resided in Boston. As it seems her in-laws were sympathetic to her cause, they may also have advised her about her book and helped her secure publication. The interpretations discussed in this article are based on the passages as they are written in the 1964 edition of Hawai‘i's Story by Hawai‘i’s Queen, published in Japan by the Charles E. Tuttle Company, which is a reprint of the 1898 copy.

8. This reference is taken from Rudyard Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden” (1899), a poem justifying imperialism that found popularity among estern audiences shortly after the publication of Lili‘uokalani’s autobiography.

9. Lili‘uokalani’s use of “her people” in this passage is also curious. We wonder why she doesn’t use “my people” since she presents herself as rightful queen of Hawai‘i. Another reading might suggest that Lili‘uokalani is implying that Kapi‘olani’s actions only broke the power of Pele over her (Kapi‘olani’s) followers.

10. A poeticism for Maui still used today is “Nā hono a Pi‘ilani,” or “The Harbors of Pi‘ilani,” to emphasize the period of peace and prosperity brought to Maui under Pi‘ilani’s rule.

11. A 2,102-line creation and genealogical chant, the Kumulipo traces the beginnings of the Kanaka Maoli concept of the universe and its evolution. The Kumulipo is divided into sixteen wā, or eras of creation, with the first eight wā occurring in the time of pō (darkness, night), when the heaven and earth are created, as well as the plants, animals and gods, and the final eight wā occurring in the time of ao (light, day), when human genealogies descend from the gods. The chant impressively traces the lineage of over eight hundred generations. The entire chant was memorized, performed, and verbally passed down among genealogists since its creation, estimated to be in the sixteenth century, until it was written down in 1881 by King Kalākaua and his genealogists. The Kumulipo was subsequently translated into English by Queen Lili‘uokalani, who inherited the throne from her brother, Kalākaua. Her translation of this important chant began during her eight-month imprisonment in ‘Iolani Palace in 1895, two years after the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom.

12. Halema‘uma‘u translates as “House of the ama‘u fern” and refers to another Pele-Hi‘iaka mo‘olelo in which Pele develops a contentious love-hate relationship with Kamapua‘a, the Hawaiian pig god. A battle ensues between Pele, supported by her family, and Kamapua‘a, who uses water to extinguish their fires. Ultimately, Pele prevails and Kamapua‘a flees. In one of his efforts to escape Pele, Kamapua‘a transforms himself into the ‘ama‘u fern, whose coloring is green with burnt red fringes, said to be where Kamapua‘a, in his fern form, was burned. The ‘ama‘u fern can be found in certain vegetated areas on the slopes of Kīlauea.

13. Tongue is a volcanology term employed specifically to describe the formation of
the lava that breaks out of the cooled and hardened crust first formed in a pāhoehoe lava flow. This formation resembles a tongue spilling out of a mouth. Alternate words to describe the same effect are "lobes" and "toes."

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