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A Critical Reading of Aloha and Visual Sovereignty in *Ke Kulana He Māhū*

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Abstract

Native Studies and Queer Studies have begun creating linkages that interrogate the normalization of heterosexuality within Native communities and the ways that settler colonialism has been unquestioned in Queer Studies scholarship. This article adds to this body of scholarship by performing a critical re-reading of the film, *Ke Kulana He Māhū* (2001), a film about the history of sexuality in Hawai'i and the role of māhūs in modern day Hawaiian culture. The film engages the struggles for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights in Hawai'i throughout the 1990s, but, curiously, it obscures the Hawaiian sovereignty movement that was happening simultaneously. Against this backdrop, I examine the rhetorical performance of aloha in the film and the dangers of harnessing Hawaiian culture to support the recognition of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) rights. This article also examines how the film participates in visual sovereignty to foreground Kanaka Maoli commitments to cultural identity, community and belonging.

Keywords

Indigenous film, queer indigeneity, Kanaka Maoli, politics of recognition, sexuality.

Introduction

Ke Kulana He Māhū: Remembering a Sense of Place (2001) is a beautifully rendered film that in a way presaged the emergence in recent years of Queer Indigenous Studies as an intellectual and political force within Indigenous/Native Studies and Queer Studies. *Ke Kulana He Māhū* premiered in Hawai'i in 2001 and was met with community and critical acclaim as it travelled across the Pacific and the North American continent. The interdisciplinary, intellectual rigor that exists today within Queer Studies and Native Studies had not yet been theorized, and a body of scholarship that analyzed Native film or indigeneity in film through a critical lens was just emerging. This article brings together critiques in Queer Indigenous Studies and Michelle Raheja's concept of 'visual sovereignty' to analyze and reevaluate *Ke Kulana He Māhū*, offering both praise and critique.

Let me be clear: My aim is not to disparage the filmmakers or the film itself; *Ke Kulana He Māhū* is one of the most important films ever made about Hawai'i and, to date, it is the only film that focuses on how colonialism altered sexuality and interpersonal relationships in Hawai'i.¹ Further, I have a personal stake in this film, as it was transformative for me, a young Kanaka Maoli¹ who attended the premiere and felt connected to the māhū's¹ stories. I know that I am not the only one affected by the film in this way. The film offered visibility to the frequently ignored lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community in Hawai'i, as it provided a genealogy of the diverse expressions of sexuality within Hawaiian culture and also represented contemporary LGBTQ populations in Hawai'i as part of that history.

In this article, I begin by outlining some of the recent contributions in the field of Queer Indigenous Studies and underscoring the importance of these critical interventions. Much of the Queer Indigenous Studies work has been theorized in the context of the North American continent and the Pacific Islands; I apply this intellectual frame to the specific political context in Hawai'i.ⁱ Through a close reading of *Ke Kulana He Māhū*, I unpack the ways in which the Hawaiian concept of aloha is depoliticized and domesticated throughout the film, given that the film does not connect aloha to the possibilities of Hawai'i's independence or to Hawaiian sovereignty. Rather than dismiss this domestication as an indication of the film's critical lack, I discuss the ways in which the power of the visual overrides it. Using Raheja's concept of visual sovereignty, I reframe the significance of this film, which has allowed many LGBTQ Kānaka Maoli (and settlers in Hawai'i) to see themselves represented. I end by thinking about the 'sense of place' that the film intends to represent as the measure of its radical possibility.

Queer Indigenous Studies

The burgeoning field of Queer Indigenous Studies has created new space within Native Studies to question the imposition of heteropatriarchy and its impact on non-heteronormative relations in Native communities. In the groundbreaking anthology *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature* (2011), the place of LGBTQⁱⁱ Natives was highlighted in order to examine the long-term effects of heteropatriarchal colonial systems on Native peoples. The anthology also expressed a desire to encourage decolonial activism. Not content to merely focus on how Native LGBTQ² people were excluded, scholarship in Queer Indigenous Studies began to trace a longer history of exclusion that queered Native peoples in the name of building a settler-state. To 'queer' these histories then, Andrea Smith challenges Queer Studies and Native Studies by asserting that Indigenous nationhood must be analyzed beyond the "mirror image of a heteronormative state" (Smith 2010, 59). As Chris Finley writes, "Heteropatriarchy has become so natural in many Native communities that it is internalized and institutionalized as if it were traditional" (2011, 34). Thus, while Native Studies has theorized the necessity of dismantling settler-colonialism in order for Native sovereignty to thrive, it has yet to *queer* its understanding of settler-colonialism. Smith (2010) notes that queer theory has significantly disrupted LGBT studies by critically challenging the logics of heteronormativity. However, it has failed to account for the ongoing practices and implications of settler-colonialism, which have the potential to structure settler-colonialism distinctly as a logic and practice that affects all of society, not just Indigenous people (Smith 2010, 42–44). The latter is an important aspect of Queer Indigenous Studies' intellectual and political contributions, as Scott Morgensen (2011) explains: In order to 'unsettle' settler-colonialism, we must work on multiple levels of civic and private life to critique and transform the way settlers and Natives interact with one another, within and across communities (p. 16).

In Hawai'i, settler-colonialism has been an especially contentious issue. Asian settler communities, who represent a legacy of multiple generations with roots in plantation labor immigration primarily from Asia, have given rise to a so-called 'local culture', which overlaps with Kanaka Maoli culture in precarious ways. It is beyond the bounds of this article to discuss these debates, but, as Dean Saranillio (2013, 282) argues, "Taking into account Native epistemes, histories, and knowledges can transform ways of knowing with implications for ways of observing the material force of settler colonialism, particularly injustices that are often obfuscated or ideologically invisible to settlers ...". I follow Saranillio's (2013) lead and add that, by understanding how settler-colonialism transformed all relationships in Hawai'i—not just sexual ones—we are able to think differently about how we relate to one another, how we relate to the land, and how we sustain our communities without erasing historical violence. In *Ke Kulana He Māhū*, the participants indicate a 'local' politics that acknowledges the past, but represents an emergent

rethinking of the politics of place and Hawaiian culture and history. My analysis of this film endeavors to illuminate this rethinking.

Remembering a Sense of Place

On November 13, 2013, after 55 hours of public testimony and weeks of contentious debate, Hawai'i Governor Neil Abercrombie signed into law the 'Hawai'i Marriage Equality Act of 2013' (Senate Bill 1), a bill legalizing same-sex marriage.ⁱⁱⁱ During the signing ceremony, Abercrombie explained that his goal was to help Hawai'i move forward with aloha. He invoked aloha by initially questioning what it means. This question was not new, given that aloha is one of the most overused words in Hawai'i and in Hawaiian politics especially. However, because aloha featured so prominently in the debate over same-sex marriage, Abercrombie felt it necessary to remind us all what it stood for. He pointed out that despite the conflicts that the bill may have stirred up within the state, we (the audience and people of Hawai'i) should remember that aloha is written into our very constitution, our laws, and, above all else, this place.

Aloha is defined in the Hawaiian dictionary as love, affection, compassion, mercy; to love, to venerate, to show kindness; and as a salutation. Aloha has emerged as the essence of Hawaiianness, but it was just one aspect of precolonial Hawaiian life, and it came from a larger philosophical matrix of Hawaiian ideas and values (Kanahēle 1986, 480; Puku'i 1983). Aloha meant kindness and sharing, especially in the family, or 'ohana, setting where people were welcomed and all was shared, with the understanding that people gathered to provide mutual helpfulness for collective benefit (Puku'i 1983, 3). When Hawai'i was granted statehood in 1959 it became officially known as 'The Aloha State' and, since then, Hawai'i's inclusive reputation has always been intertwined with aloha.^{iv}

Invoking 'The Aloha State' and the 'Aloha Law'^v during the signing of Senate Bill 1, Abercrombie reiterated that the Hawai'i constitution includes a law that intends to promote kindness and pleasantness within our communities. He declared, "We have an obligation to treat each other with kindness and aloha and patience and perseverance"^{vi} This declaration of aloha and the passing of the 'marriage equality bill', after over twenty years of legislative and court battles relating to same-sex marriage or civil unions in the 'Aloha State', may have felt to many like a victory. In Hawai'i, invoking aloha in this context has become a way of life.

Most compelling about these struggles in Hawai'i are the complex threads connecting the existence of same-sex relations in pre-colonial times, the history of colonialism in Hawai'i and the rhetoric of the aloha spirit, which polices people's so-called prejudices, advancing an agenda that almost always includes acceptance, tolerance and inclusion of cultural difference. As Jon Goldberg-Hiller (2002) astutely argues in *Limits to the Union*, the usage of aloha in Hawai'i purports to invoke a feeling of love or welcome toward all people, which makes possible the marketing of aloha to include tolerance of sexual expression (p. 38). Hawai'i was notably the first state to hear legal arguments for same-sex marriage when three LGBT couples filed for marriage licenses in 1991. Media coverage of same-sex marriage in local, national and international media was extensive. In public testimony, newspaper articles and editorials, supporters of same-sex marriage invoked the 'spirit of aloha' as the reason same-sex marriage should be legalized in Hawai'i. The enduring residues of nineteenth-century colonial discourse, which painted the Pacific as a place where people were freed from moral constraints, causing them to 'give in to their senses' and transgress sexual taboos, only exacerbated the perception that same-sex relations were 'normal' in Hawai'i (Morris 1990, Kame'eleihiwa 1992; Wallace 2003; O'Brien 2006). Present-day representations of Hawai'i as a land of sand, sun and fun, as a place where

you can be ‘free’ and ‘feel the aloha spirit’, ironically hinge on the very processes by which Kanaka Maoli land and sexuality were colonized to fit within a Western capitalist model. Throughout the late nineteenth century, Kanaka Maoli sexuality was domesticated into Christian morality, to ready us both for salvation and for capitalist development (Merry 2000). These political transformations are rarely referenced in mainstream media coverage, particularly in the LGBT press, which typically favors a story about Hawaiian history that focuses on how sexuality was transformed, while ignoring the role of the United States of America (US) in the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom or the way capitalist enterprise dispossessed Kānaka Maoli of our lands.

Indeed, it is the knowledge of non-heteronormative relationships that continues to cast Hawai‘i and the Pacific as spaces of the erotic and exotic, as cited repeatedly in the press.^{vi} During the early years of the struggle for same-sex marriage in Hawai‘i, the debate spoke of deep anxieties about Hawai‘i’s global image and its economic reliance on tourism. With Hawai‘i’s ailing economy based almost entirely on tourism, same-sex marriage and its impact on Hawai‘i’s reputation were certainly contentious issues. Hawai‘i eventually became the first state to ostensibly ban same-sex marriage in 1998 (Kobayashi 1993; Wright 1994; Rosegg 1994). The moral and economic implications of same-sex marriage also reflected an underlying concern over who would be included in Hawai‘i and, more importantly, who would have access to its preeminent resource, the spirit of aloha.

Aloha occupies a vexed space in Hawai‘i. The commodification of aloha has surely allowed its meanings to be misused and decontextualized from its Hawaiian cultural roots. Still, according to Olana ‘Ai, aloha operates in many ways for Kānaka Maoli as “the intelligence with which we meet life” (Meyer 2003, 18). To that end, it has cultural and political power within the islands. Many scholars, including myself, have criticized the appropriation of aloha and credited it with obscuring the troubling material realities that Kānaka Maoli live under as indigenous peoples struggling with settler-colonialism. At the same time, we invoke aloha and openly share it because we are emotionally invested in what we have been taught aloha is. In the next section, I will examine how aloha functions in *Ke Kulana he Māhū*.

Ke Kulana He Māhū

The first five minutes of the film prepare the viewer for an affective, nostalgic, tear-jerking, infuriating journey into the history of Hawai‘i. The film is set to a backdrop of evocative, contemporary Hawaiian music: Keali‘i Reichel’s song ‘Maunaleo’ accompanies present-day shots of Waikīkī’s coastline with Diamond Head in the background, interspersed with black-and-white archival images of Hawai‘i and Kānaka Maoli. The history of the māhū and personal narratives of modern-day māhū are contextualized by historians and cultural specialists who explain the impact of colonialism in Hawai‘i and its more current implications with regard to the debates around same-sex marriage in the 1990s. In the film, Hawai‘i’s history is described as a “history of aloha amidst Western exclusion” and the viewer is encouraged to question colonialism in Hawai‘i, especially as it pertains to ideas about sexuality. When the film first premiered, it garnered well-deserved praise from numerous independent Asian American/Pacific Islander American (APIA) and LGBTQ film festivals across the US and the Pacific, winning Best Local Film at the Honolulu Gay & Lesbian Film Festival and Best Documentary at the Chicago Lesbian and Gay Film Fest in 2002. The film was also screened at the Smithsonian and continues to be shown in university classes across the US and the Pacific.^{viii}

The first half of the film summarizes pre-colonial Hawaiian sexual practices in order to contextualize the historical and cultural significance of the māhū, relating sexuality to familial and social organization. During this historical and cultural centering, scholars, specialists and activists are situated between

montages of imagery of modern-day Honolulu. The dominant and recurring visuals oscillate among archival images of Kānaka Maoli (fishing, selling newspapers, making leis), images of Waikīkī's crowded beaches and streets, and landscape shots of Honolulu littered with high-rise buildings with the ominously beautiful Ko'olau mountain range in the distance. Following this visual grounding and musical interlude, a voice-over narration explains, "In modern day Hawai'i, Kānaka Maoli are attempting to regain their language, culture, and history, surviving a near decimation of their population due to foreign disease, racism, and assimilation." The montage ends with shots of Hinaleimoana Wong, teaching Hawaiian language classes and dancing hula with what appears to be an all-māhū hula hālau (group). This transitional narration sets up the next portion of the film, which examines the adoption of capitalism in Hawai'i and the influence that it has had on Kānaka Maoli. Following this sequence, the film shifts to 'modern times', profiling Honolulu's drag community and the realities of living as māhū. The 'modern' portion of the film brings to light the homophobia that exists in Hawai'i; something that is seldom discussed in public. Two performers, Cocoa Chandelier and Skeeter Mariah Crackseed, are featured prominently, with commentary, photographs, performance montages and interviews with the performers and their mothers.

As the film progresses, the role of colonialism in changing Kānaka Maoli (or local) attitudes toward the LGBT community is explained. The argument, bolstered by the presentation of historical evidence, is evocative and convincing in its interrogation of the bigotry expressed in opposition to same-sex marriage. The film calls into question the media campaign of the group, Save Traditional Marriage, which, in the 1990s, used campaign tactics that framed homosexuality as a foreign import. At this point, the film briefly departs from explicit LGBTQ-focused issues to document the impact of Hansen's disease (leprosy)—which many Hawai'i residents and, particularly, many Kānaka Maoli, contracted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—on Hawai'i and the subsequent quarantine of patients at the 'leper colony' on Kalaupapa, Moloka'i. Images of people suffering from Hansen's disease are accompanied by narration describing how 'healthy' Kānaka Maoli would refuse to leave their loved ones as they were being quarantined—even at the risk of contracting the disease themselves—and praising them for their aloha. The importance of the words aloha and 'ohana (family) is explained through their etymologies, with an emphasis on their cultural significance for Kānaka Maoli. Reverend Kaleo Patterson contends that the exclusion of those who had Hansen's disease is emblematic of conflicting Western and Hawaiian values; that is, in the West, disease is dealt with through exclusion, and in Hawaiian culture, disease—or in a sense, difference—would be attended to with the giving of more love. This particular segment is juxtaposed with the film's overall argument that, in Hawai'i, the exclusion of LGBTQ people or anyone who is 'different' is a modern phenomenon; one that has serious social and cultural consequences. The film proceeds to discuss the murder of a gay man in the local community. As Ty Kawika Tengan (2003) explains in his review of the film, this portion of the film seems disjointed. I disagree. The juxtaposition of this murder and the quarantine of Hansen's disease patients conveys that these realities are both produced by conditions of difference and exclusion, and the ultimate cost is life itself. It also signals the filmmakers' intention to document the lived experiences of the LGBTQ community in Hawai'i, who may have been experiencing this tragedy as filming took place. In both cases, the supportive and loving community response is attributed to aloha. This portion of the film manages to accomplish its task of educating lay-viewers about the importance of aloha and 'ohana in Hawai'i. The film ends where it began, with Ku'umeaaloha Gomes asking viewers if they could remember what life was like before colonialism and wondering how we might return to a more inclusive and loving Hawai'i.

A Story of Aloha Amidst Western Exclusion

Ke Kulana He Māhū attempts to challenge colonialism and its impact on sexuality in Hawai'i, but what emerges is actually an interrogation of colonialism and how it transformed all relationships and senses of belonging in the islands. There are a few moments when the film reverts to a nostalgia for a simpler Hawai'i, representing Kānaka Maoli and aloha as being synonymous with nature and detached from governmental politics. Twelve minutes into the film, a voiceover explains:

Hawai'i's story is one of colonialism, racism, land, and culture, but above all it is the story of aloha in the midst of trial and opposition. It is this aloha or love and respect that has survived the centuries within the hearts and minds of Hawai'i's indigenous people, the Kānaka Maoli ...

This narration sets up the transition from a discussion of sexuality in precolonial times to a discussion of sexuality in modern-day Honolulu. These words are spoken over a series of black-and-white still images of Kānaka Maoli. The first image depicts local children smiling wearing hāku leis (flower garlands) around their heads. This is followed by an image of a young Kanaka Maoli man at the beach holding up a handful of fish, with a triumphant smile on his face. Next, we see a similar image of what appears to be a Kānaka Maoli couple walking on the beach: A woman walks next to a shirtless man who has a fishnet draped over his shoulder. As the montage transitions to the modern day, the imagery is colorized, and shifts to action shots of the beach, Waikīkī hotels and traffic. The voiceover continues, explaining that foreign disease, racism and assimilation caused a near decimation of Hawaiian culture, but that, in the present day, Kānaka Maoli are attempting to regain their language, culture and history. At the end of the montage, members of a māhū hula hālau are shown in a park, preparing their hula costumes. The wind blows their hair as they help each other to put on their pā'ū, or skirt. These images, juxtaposed with the voiceover, position Kānaka Maoli and their 'aloha spirit' solely in the space of the 'natural'.

As indigenous people, Kānaka Maoli have a special relationship with nature or the land. Certainly it is this relationship that anchors Kanaka Maoli sovereignty claims, and it is this relationship that differentiates Kānaka Maoli from Asian settlers and haoles (foreigners)^{ix} in the islands. However, as Brendan Hokowhitu (2008) explains, the Native's relationship to the land is wrongly misinterpreted as being characterized by 'primitive inertia', which implies that Natives cannot evolve or be civilized (p. 116). Similarly, as Andrea Smith (2010) contends, when Natives are looked to as resources for particular kinds of knowledges (like the ability to *have aloha*), they become equated with nature; a first step in rendering indigeneity as a static object that possesses an essential truth (p. 42). Recall the voiceover in the film: "It is this aloha or love and respect" that survives in the hearts and minds of the Kanaka Maoli people. While this narrative framing can be affirming for Kānaka Maoli, it does not dismantle the practice of appropriating culture from Native people, who are seen as part of nature itself and, thus, available for modern subjects to draw from as they see fit.

Throughout the film, Kānaka Maoli are constructed as a natural resource with aloha as its product, a view that is expressed by both settlers and Kānaka Maoli. As Wendy Brown (2008) argues in *Regulating Aversion*, under liberalism, subjects are identified with and reduced to certain attributes or practices that influence and generate certain beliefs and a certain consciousness. This is clearly evident in the film, as specialists and clergy confer aloha onto Kānaka Maoli. Of course, we Kānaka Maoli even do this to ourselves. This imposition and subsequent performance of aloha is actively internalized and performed by Kānaka Maoli in complex ways. Aloha can be an ideological force that dispossesses Kānaka Maoli of our claims to cultural authority, while also functioning as an affirmation of Hawaiian

culture that Kānaka Maoli are profoundly invested in, despite—or in the face of—its tourist-driven commodification and the ideological violence it represents (Ohnuma 2008; Imada 2012; Teves 2012). One of the principal ways that this marginalization and dispossession occurs is by repeatedly relegating Kānaka Maoli to the realm of nature, which modern liberalism defines as politics' other, thereby freeing up culture to be had or possessed (commodified) for other (political) purposes.

Throughout the film, aloha is heralded as the very essence of Kānaka Maoli and of a Hawai'i that existed in harmony with the land, ocean and cosmos. Aloha is defined as a kind of uncritical inclusion in which everyone is welcomed regardless of his or her difference, particularly in relation to racial or cultural background. Asian settler-colonial critiques have analyzed how the seeming appearance of 'harmonious multiculturalism' in Hawai'i has been a project of the US empire, which continues to displace Kānaka Maoli in their own land and reconsolidates American hegemony through Asian-settler collusion with liberal multiculturalism (Fujikane & Okamura 2008). Such critiques have not been easily received in Hawai'i, but I view Reverend Darrow Aiona's explanation of aloha in the film as indicative of the material ways in which aloha can be expressed to promote responsibility.^x In his interview, Aiona explains that the aloha spirit is about welcoming people into the 'ohana. He says, "Hawaiian culture is a very accepting culture; it does not discriminate—that's what the aloha spirit is. Everybody comes, they become of the family—that's what 'ohana means." Then comes a critical scene in the film, when Aiona explains the significance of the 'hā', or breath. He describes how aloha is related to 'ohana, to the 'ohā plant, which is a stalk that is used to support taro, sugar cane and layers in banana stumps. Aiona's breakdown of aloha into its linguistic components connects aloha to Hawaiian epistemologies and life in Hawai'i. He concludes with the following comment: "The 'hā' is very important. Breath. And that breath is shared." While Aiona is speaking, images are shown of mähūs participating in the community—serving food and being active in what appears to be a church setting. A close reading of this scene reveals how mähū are active in aspects of life in Hawai'i.

This teaches viewers about the importance of being present and about the responsibilities to aloha, to 'ohana, and to place. Aiona's explanation of aloha is supported by Puku'i (1983) and Kanahale (1986), who discuss aloha in relationship to 'ohana and explain that aloha is supposed to be a reciprocal relationship between members of the 'ohana and the extended community, who work together for mutual benefit (Puku'i 1983, 220). This echoes what Kānaka Maoli know and what most people believe about aloha in Hawaiian contexts. This is well exemplified by the mähū and their 'ohana profiled in the film.

Historically, aloha was politically harnessed to support Christianity, multiculturalism and tourism, and to quell political dissent (Kaomea 2000; Pierce 2004; Ohnuma 2008). In the film, the focus on the mähū and on Hawaiian cultural differences and the experiences of the mähū can also work to reify ideas about the Native as existing in harmony with nature or existing primarily in the past, in a way that continues to exoticize Kānaka Maoli. As Raheja (2012) has explained, representations of Natives in film must always contend with the widely circulated images of the Native. This operates similarly with regard to Kānaka Maoli and aloha. Any time that aloha is invoked, it is done so against an opus of imagery that influences people's understanding of Hawaiian culture—even if a film is working to complicate the audience's understanding. In *Ke Kulana He Mähū*, the audience is taught that aloha and 'ohana are about love and family, and that this is what is special about Hawai'i. An effect of this understanding of aloha (marking Hawai'i as available to all) is its facile support of liberal multiculturalism, same-sex marriage and, lest we forget, gay tourism.^{xi} I flag this to cite the danger that such articulations of aloha can produce. When aloha is consistently harnessed to welcome difference, it is sadly flattened and represented ahistorically. At the same time, aloha retains its cultural power—through Kanaka Maoli

belief in it and, as *Ke Kulana He Māhū* shows, through the sustaining of community and 'ohana in Hawai'i. Scholars in the film discuss the consequences of Kānaka Maoli losing their land and culture, but there is no discussion of how Kānaka Maoli are working to rebuild their nation. Nor is there any mention of Hawaiian politics, other than the debate over same-sex marriage. Additionally, no connection is made to how aloha might be rearticulated in such a way that it allows Kānaka Maoli to harness political power and exercise their sovereignty as Indigenous peoples.

Aloha, Not Sovereignty

Despite the film's fervent stance on how colonialism ravaged traditional Hawaiian sexuality, a conversation about Hawaiian sovereignty is curiously absent. Even though the film advances a staunch critique of colonialism, the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom is only mentioned in passing, and the modern sovereignty movement is never even referenced. By the early 1990s, Hawaiian sovereignty had made considerable gains in the realm of public awareness. In 1993, to commemorate the centennial anniversary of the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, numerous Hawaiian activist groups held one of the largest marches in Hawaiian history, with over 15,000 people demonstrating. The public display of Kanaka Maoli aspirations for some kind of acknowledgement of the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom resulted in the Apology Bill, signed into law by President Clinton in 1993, which explicitly references Kanaka Maoli rights to self-determination. For a film about Kānaka Maoli and modern Hawai'i, this is a huge oversight. Throughout the film, the only manner in which Kānaka Maoli are represented is through our enduring cultural difference. The film focuses on the transformation that occurred as a result of colonialism, but it fails to link colonial processes to any sense of Kanaka Maoli sovereignty outside of the individual narratives of the māhū in the film or in the broader LGBTQ movement.

Although the film presents an anti-colonial perspective and, to a certain extent, an anti-capitalist stance, its main problem lies ultimately in how it *detaches* aloha from Kānaka Maoli by detaching Kānaka Maoli from politics. The film's depiction of the prominent Kanaka Maoli activist and scholar Lilikalā Kame'eleihiwa^{xii} is a prime example of how a form of anti-colonial criticism can be advanced without properly understanding Kanaka Maoli sovereignty struggles. Towards the film's end, Kame'eleihiwa criticizes the standards by which Christian morality was imposed and perpetrated throughout Hawai'i. She expresses disgust that missionary standards continue to structure law in Hawai'i: "... those Calvinists are still today trying to oppress Hawaiians, trying to take away Hawaiian rights ...". The film cuts, but she continues, "... same genealogy". Cut again. Kame'eleihiwa's words become inaudible. Was something edited out? Was she too repetitive, too political, or did she just digress? Ku'umeaaloha Gomes, who was also featured in the film, told me in a recent interview that she remembers very vividly how she was asked to 'tone down the sovereignty'^{xiii} during the panel discussions, especially when the film was touring the US continent. She felt like she was being asked to 'choose' between her LGBTQ and Kanaka Maoli identity, as well as her stance on Hawaiian sovereignty. While the film levies a strong argument against colonialism because of its impact on Hawaiian sexuality, this critique is never extended to contemporary political issues involving struggles for Hawaiian sovereignty. I highlight these moments to foreground a critique of the ways that Kanaka Maoli differences (and contributions via aloha) are always framed as cultural, not political. This discourse participates in the settler-colonial process of marginalizing and dispossessing Kānaka Maoli of their political centrality in Hawai'i, while keeping prized elements of Hawaiian culture for any number of competing purposes.

The detachment of aloha from politics is common under liberal multiculturalism because culture is conquered and politically neutered by the non-cultural principle of liberalism (Brown 2008, 21). In the Hawaiian context, this is enacted in multiple ways: Removing aloha from Kānaka Maoli by making it our

'gift to the world', while conferring aloha onto Kānaka Maoli in a pernicious fashion that honors Hawaiian culture by locking Kanaka Maoli individuals into a cultural cage. As Rey Chow (2008) has posited, gazing at, consuming and learning about these 'others' evokes the behavior of visitors to the zoo, who proceed from cage to cage to see the animals. No matter how well intentioned the viewer, the image is always somehow out of focus, an obfuscation that stems from the production of a certain type of gaze, one that dislocates and displaces the objects of scrutiny to begin with, even when they are speaking for and representing themselves (pp. 99-100). Outreach to new audiences is not without danger, as Steven Leuthold (1998) explains in *Indigenous Aesthetics*. Images lose their local context and wider distribution may result in a compromising of cultural conventions and practices (p. 74). Certainly, as the māhū voices represented in the film begin to circulate in multiple discourses, there is an inherent risk that these narratives, like all cultural productions, will be taken out of context. Remaining critical of these processes is crucial when interrogating the politics of knowledge production, especially with regard to groups that have been historically disenfranchised and purposely left out of the historical record. Although the Kanaka Maoli difference is highlighted throughout *Ke Kulana He Māhū* in the form of aloha, it is not explained in terms of Indigenous peoples with a right to sovereignty or self-determination. Instead, cultural difference is foregrounded in a way that obviates Kanaka Maoli governance as a viable possibility. Still, the film is filled with vibrant expressions of Kanaka Maoli survivance and māhū pride. The next section will look closely at visual sovereignty to explicate how this film exceeds the limitations of my own critique.

Visual Sovereignty

In *Reservation Reelism*, Michelle Raheja (2012) coined the term 'visual sovereignty'. Building upon prior theorizations of sovereignty in Native contexts, Raheja explains that visual sovereignty is the creative practice of self-representation that engages and deconstructs white-generated representations. Also, visual sovereignty allows communities to negotiate what sovereignty and self-representation can mean through new media technologies in order to reimagine Native intellectual and cultural paradigms (p. 200). In this way, it intervenes in a larger discussion of Native sovereignty and autonomy that does not rely on Western jurisprudence (p. 197). Thinking outside of jurisprudence is necessary when analyzing cultural production, because it promotes innovative Native expressions and futures. In a Kanaka Maoli context wherein the question of federal recognition pervades much of the public political discourse among Kānaka Maoli, it is critical to allow artists, filmmakers and performers to express their politics in multiple genres, in ways that the settler-state may not even be able to see.

Raheja (2012) suggests a reading practice that allows filmmakers and participants to reconfigure ethnographic film conventions, while also stretching the boundaries of their constraints (p. 194). From the work of Margaret Mead to Robert Flaherty, there has always been an anthropological interest in the sexualities of Pacific Islanders. Thus, Hawai'i is always framed amidst ever-present exoticization, as well as the broader Pacific's pervasive image as a tropical and sexual Eden. However, the documentary style of *Ke Kulana He Māhū* and the entrenchment of its participants in the local community produces a collective sense of self-representation that historicizes and sustains the community in a time of crisis. In 2001, when the film came out, it was screened throughout Hawai'i. The filmmakers explained that they wanted to teach the audience about the connections between the past and present effects of colonization. They acknowledged their Asian LGBT standpoint and that the film's underlying message was about respecting one another via aloha, but they did not force these connections.^{xiv} Although the directors were Asians who grew up in Hawai'i, the participation of Hawai'i's LGBTQ community (which has a considerable Kanaka Maoli population) influenced development of the film. The interviews with prominent Kānaka Maoli attest to its collaborative nature. The film's first screenings were often followed

by a panel discussion. The panels included the filmmakers, academic and cultural experts, mǎhū, and drag queens themselves, who were sometimes in drag. At these screenings, the filmmakers said that they sought to bring dignity to the mǎhū by letting their voices be heard. This is especially apparent in the way that mǎhū in the film speak explicitly about their families' reactions to them, and about the importance of having a place in Pacific cultures as mǎhū or fa'afafine.^{xv} The panel discussions were critical, especially in Hawai'i, where Kanaka Maoli audiences are hungry for Hawaiian content that documents contemporary issues with a critique of colonization. As I mentioned, Gomes recalled that she was asked to downplay sovereignty during the panel discussions, but more progressive audiences were able to pick up on this silence—both in the panel and in the film—and made sure to ask questions about it. Thus, the community screenings allowed sovereignty to be addressed and provided space for the suppressed voices of the mǎhū to be celebrated in visual public narrative for the first time, giving them a space to be seen and heard. The mǎhū spoke to dispel myths, solidify their contemporary presence and situate themselves in Hawaiian culture.

Despite the tensions Gomes alluded to, the film achieved what it set out to do. That is, it brought integrity and exposure to mǎhū community in Hawai'i. This is exemplified in the first few minutes of the film, when Hinaimoana Wong asserts, "In American culture, I do not always feel that I have a place, but in my own culture—in Hawaiian culture—I definitely have a place. I know exactly where I stand." It is in this moment that visual sovereignty and its political possibilities begin to emerge. Throughout the film, Wong is represented as a cultural practitioner and educator who explicitly links her mǎhū identity to Hawaiian indigeneity. Several times throughout the film she is shown dancing hula with a hālau (hula group), but never in a staged drag show performance. Wong's performance is depicted in nature—at the beach, at the park—and she wears everyday clothing that might be described as 'Hawaiian' (e.g., mu'umu'u). She is represented in the film as a spiritual and cultural specialist, not as a drag performer. Her position is firmly rooted in Hawaiian culture because she is a trained educator in Hawaiian history and language and, in recent years, has emerged as a prominent leader in the Hawaiian charter school movement.^{xvi} She is shown teaching a Hawaiian language class, speaking explicitly about Hawaiian values coming into conflict with Western capitalism, and offering an interpretation of Hawaiian mythology. Her portrayal in the film speaks directly to being culturally rooted in a way that clearly expresses visual sovereignty.

Although they are not given as much screen time, there are other moments when mǎhū are shown expressing visual sovereignty. In one scene, two mǎhū, Kalua and Stacey, talk with each other. Kalua states, "I feel proud to be mǎhū. I'm very proud of it. I don't feel anything different from anybody else." Stacey responds, "Now mǎhū is like, if somebody says mǎhū ... And? I'm over mǎhū, you know what I mean? You're calling me a mǎhū (laughs)." Being called mǎhū is not derogatory to them anymore; they are proud to be mǎhū. The mǎhū in the film express a firm rootedness and pride in who they are, in spite of what people may think of them. Put another way, as Kalua, Stacey and a number of other people are able to proclaim in film, they are proud to be mǎhū. I read visual sovereignty in these scenes because they narrate Kanaka Maoli and mǎhū cultural survival in the face of genocide and colonialism. What *Ke Kulana He Mǎhū* achieves, then, is a documentation of how 'ohana, or community, is connected to a gendered and culturally specific way of being that is maintained, reformed and reimagined through performances, whether they be dancing hula, performing in a drag show or educating people. Visual sovereignty animates these scenes and makes them possible through what Raheja (2012) has described as imaginative renderings of intellectual and cultural paradigms that are often not possible in formalized political spaces (p. 200). By featuring these overlooked spaces in film—the club, the street corner, the home, the beach—the everyday lived realities of the mǎhū are acknowledged and depicted as part of Hawai'i's social, political and cultural landscape. The visual

representation of m̄hū, while heavily mediated, combats m̄hū invisibility and makes possible a reimagining of their importance in modern Hawaiian culture. When their voices are closely listened to, it becomes apparent that they are firmly rooted.

Resisting Homonormativity

The ‘sense of place’ that the film conveys is emblematic of a certain kind of spirituality that exists only in Hawai‘i—one that is made up of the connection that people have with the land and with one another. The same-sex marriage and gay civil rights conflicts in the 1990s are also part of this ‘sense of place’. By juxtaposing m̄hū narratives with documentation of the Hawai‘i’s same-sex marriage debates, the producers of the film impose aspirations for LGBTQ marriage politics on the m̄hū, implying that they desire inclusion. However, the visual sovereignty exercised by m̄hū in the film operates in ways that evade and undermine their juridical contexts.

Careful attention to the voices of the m̄hū in the film reveals that they do not, in fact, support the film’s seeming project of using aloha to secure LGBTQ civil rights. At no time do any m̄hū in the film express any interest in being accepted in dominant society. Nor do they express a desire for same-sex (or any kind of) marriage, or a desire for their rights to be protected. Not a single m̄hū in the film even utters the word ‘aloha’. With the exception of the voiceover in the film, the word ‘aloha’ is only spoken by Reverend Aiona, who discusses aloha’s etymology and cultural significance (as noted earlier in this article). Moreover, no m̄hū (other than Hialeimoana Wong) are shown talking about how their lives link up with issues in the larger LGBTQ community or with Hawaiian sovereignty. It is scholars and specialists who link m̄hū to larger issues of LGBTQ civil rights.

Thus, these expressions of visual sovereignty resist homonormativity. Lisa Duggan (2003) has described homonormativity as a depoliticized version of gay culture that advocates domesticity and consumption, and that favors a corporate culture “achieved by the neoliberal privatization of affect as well as economic and public life”, which in turn normalizes a gay, white middle-class invested in securing equal access to marriage rights (p. 66). Marriage is introduced towards the end of the film, but the way in which it is framed does not advocate ‘equality’ or inclusion. The only person that uses such terms is Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller (2002), whose subsequent book, *Limits to the Union*, details the same-sex marriage debates in Hawai‘i and their wider implications for political sovereignty and civil rights. None of the other speakers in the film—performers, archivists or specialists—speak about equal treatment at all. Released in 2001, just as national battles for same-sex marriage became more prominent in mainstream American politics, the film rendered a picture of LGBTQ Hawai‘i that did not easily fit into a homonormative narrative because, although aloha is an affect that has been commercialized, it can never be privatized. Further, Hawaiian cultural difference, as expressed in the film, never desires inclusion. In this sense, the people featured in *Ke Kulana He M̄hū* clearly do not have a place in this homonormative future. Put another way, the ‘sense of place’ described by multiple people throughout the film resists privatization and the commercial imperatives that have been associated with homonormativity. This is when the film offers moments for both critique and hope.

While *Ke Kulana He M̄hū* emphasizes a critique of colonialism and sexuality, it also prioritizes imagery that supports collective belonging and relationships with the land. The scenes of m̄hū teaching Hawaiian language classes, performing in drag shows, dancing hula (with no audience), holding hands in prayer circles, and participating in what the narrators describe as church activities, show m̄hū happily engaged in all realms of public life. They are focused on sustaining themselves, not on being recognized by the state. Towards the end of the film, the film quietly shifts away from its discussion of

same-sex marriage and encourages viewers to remember the past in our present treatment of one another. Returning to Queer Indigenous Studies, the film brings forth the political intentions outlined by Driskill, Finley, Gilley and Morgensen, who note that “Queer Indigenous critiques do not look for recognition from the nation-state for our pain and suffering because of identities, but seek to imagine other queer possibilities for emancipation and freedom for all peoples.” (p. 212). The expressions of visual sovereignty in the film can also be connected to Native feminist theories of sovereignty that are predicated on interrelatedness and responsibility (Smith 2008, 311–312). This is evident when multiple people, including Lilikalā Kame‘eleihiwa, Ku‘umeaaloha Gomes and Caroline Sinavaiana-Gabbard, articulate the need to recall Hawaiian sexual and spiritual practices to remind us of the colonial trauma that occurred. They question the imposition of capitalism, Christianity and binary systems of thought, and propose that we revise Hawai‘i’s future. Despite the fact that the film never directly links Hawaiian indigenous governance issues with sexuality and the quest for marriage equality, it presents land and community connection as vital to living in Hawai‘i. In this, the film articulates its sense of responsibility.

Aloha and Radical Possibility

Sometimes I think there’s two kinds of people that are on this earth. There are those who pay homage to capitalism and to dollars and that kind of stuff and then there are those of us who are earth people, who feel love, who feel an attachment to each other, whose values are really different. I think that that can only come if we have a special relationship to our place. And the place that we love and that we’re willing to protect. If you allow yourself to, you can feel the heartbeat of the earth, if it’s not covered over with stuff. And in that kind of relationship you know what your place truly is and who you are. And you come to understand too that we are all earth people, but something has happened to us in society to divide us.

Ku‘umeaaloha Gomes

I choose to end by quoting Gomes at length because I believe this scene, which occurs during the last 10 minutes of the film, frames explicitly the film’s stakes. The film’s true possibility emerges from the explanations of belonging and connectedness to the land expressed by its participants—not to civil rights or same-sex marriage. Towards the end of the film, many of the scholars and performers recall a sense of place in Hawai‘i. The ‘we’ that the voices in the film invoke is ambiguous, and I could easily fall into a pessimistic mode of criticizing the film’s construction of ‘the local’ and of settler-colonialism in Hawai‘i. However, I want to resist this hyper-critical impulse because the film reminds us that when histories are assembled intersectionally, they can be understood and articulated without eclipsing each other’s complexities (Saranillio 2013, 282). The screen time dedicated to the same-sex marriage debates frames the urgent political stakes felt at the time, but the visual montages of ‘local’ people living in Hawai‘i convey a deeper message. It is a message that emphasizes cultural memory, belonging and indigenous knowledge-systems (i.e., aloha and ‘ohana), a message that implores the viewer to think differently about this place.

The māhū communities shown in *Ke Kulana He Māhū* also possess a radical potentiality because they strategically evade the ways in which neoliberalism seeks to solidify new subjects and communities for the proliferation of capitalism. This film honors the history of Hawai‘i by centering the actual experiences of Kānaka Maoli and, for those of us who see ourselves reflected in the film—whether we are māhū or not—it allows us to connect to its expressions of visual sovereignty. We remember the aloha that the māhū have for one another and that Kānaka Maoli have for the land; we remember that this aloha has

sustained Hawai'i. The viewer who is unfamiliar with this place might wrongly assume that this understanding of aloha could include them. However, as the film contends, in order to be a part of it, you have to commit to a different way of being. The final scenes of landscapes and images of locals in Hawai'i, even if modernized, remind us of this sense. The film ends with shots of the Ko'olau mountain range on the island of O'ahu. This re-orientation reminds the viewer that the land is essential to everything in the film. 'Maunaleo', a song about a beloved mountain that guards and nourishes and loves her people, plays again in the background and we hear the final lines of the song: "No Maunaleo ke aloha kū i ka la'i e. Aloha ē, aloha ē."^{xvii} The words 'aloha ē' are repeated in Keali'i Reichel's trademark soothing voice. Hawaiian language is noted for its *kaona*, or double-meaning, and I read that this moment in the film is indicative of the guardianship and love that Kānaka Maoli have for our place. As Keali'i Reichel repeats 'aloha ē', a flock of birds fly up into the sky. The song and imagery of the land, animals and people reflect all of the creatures and spirits of Hawai'i. While the appropriation of aloha in this film might feed into fantasies of Hawai'i as an all-inclusive paradise, the 'aloha ē' reminds us that we are accountable to this sense of place.

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ⁱ *Queer Indigenous Studies* (2011) features a few essays that focus on the Indigenous Pacific. See Clive Aspin, "Exploring Takatapui Identity within the Maori Community: Implications for Health and Well-Being" (113–122); Michelle Erai, "A Queer Caste: Mixing Race and Sexuality in Colonial New Zealand" (66–80); Dan Talaupapa McMullin, "Fa'afafine Notes: On Tagaloa, Jesus, and Nafanua." (81–96).

ⁱⁱ I use 'LGBTQ2' here because it is used by the editors of *Queer Indigenous Studies*. The '2' refers to people who identify as two-spirited individuals. However, 'two-spirit' is not typically used in Hawai'i, so I have chosen not to use 'LGBTQ2' elsewhere. To honor the context of that community, I will use LGBTQ to refer Hawai'i's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer.

ⁱⁱⁱ Testifiers were given two minutes. Many went over this time limit. Over 5,000 people signed up to testify.

^{iv} Hawai'i was named 'The Aloha State' in 1959. Haw. Rev. Stat. 5-7.

^v Hawai'i State Law, (L 1986, c 202, § 1). [§5-7.5]

^{vi} Neil Abercrombie can be seen signing the bill. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTX2OoNiXI>. Accessed February 19 2014.

^{vii} Do a quick search for 'Hawaiian sexuality' on the *Huffington Post* 'Gay Voices' page to get a sense of what I am referring to.

^{viii} The film circulated in the independent film circuit, screening at the Seattle Lesbian & Gay Film Festival October 2001, Hawaii International Film Festival November 2001, San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival March 2002, Chicago Asian American Showcase April 2002, Visual Communications Los Angeles Pacific Film & Video Festival May 2002, San Francisco International Lesbian & Gay Film Festival June 2002, Outtakes New Zealand Gay & Lesbian Film Festival June 2002, Peabody Festival (Maine) June 2002, Q Cinema Fort Worth Gay & Lesbian Film Festival June 2002, Asian CineVision (NYC) Asian American International Film Festival July 2002, OUTFEST Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Film Festival July 2002, and the Chicago Screening Reeling Chicago Lesbian & Gay Film Festival July 2002. It won Best Local Film Honolulu Gay & Lesbian Film Festival May 2002 and Best Documentary Chicago Lesbian & Gay Film Festival July 2002. It is difficult to track how frequently the film is still shown, but an Internet search returned several screenings of the film in New York City in the late 2000s and screenings in Pacific Island Studies courses.

^{ix} The Hawaiian term 'haole' literally translates to 'foreigner', although some have translated it to mean 'without breath' (it would be hā'ole instead, which is a separate term). Early foreigners, usually white Europeans, were called haole, although Asian immigrants were also referred to as haole in the early days of the Hawaiian Kingdom. In modern usage, it is common to refer to someone as haole if they are white, even if they are not a newcomer to the islands. It is not always derogatory, although it certainly can be.

^x For more about Asian settler-colonialism in Hawai'i and the critiques, see Fujikane and Okamura 2008; Nandita Sharma and Cynthia Wright, "Decolonizing Resistance, Challenging Colonial States", *Social Justice* 35, no. 3 (2008–9): 120–38.

^{xi} Since the early 2000s, gay tourism has become a growing industry in Hawai'i with support from many businesses and the Hawai'i Tourism Authority. See Honolulu Star-Bulletin Editorial Staff. "Gays Are an Untapped Tourism Market for Isles." *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, July 20, 2001; Whitney, Scott. "Ignoring a Golden Rainbow." *Island Business*, 2001; Lynch, Russ. "Tourism Industry Urged to Market to Gays." *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, July 19, 2001; Harada, Wayne. "Gay-Focused Travel Festival Kicks Off Today in Waikiki." *Honolulu Advertiser*, 3/15/02, 2002; Nichols, Katherine. "Gay Event Received \$50,000 from State." *Honolulu Advertiser*, 3/23/02, 2002; Yamanouchi, Kelly. "Tapping into Gay Tourism in Waikiki." *Honolulu Advertiser*, 8/17/03, 2003; Schaefer, Allison. "Panda Travel Targets Gays and Lesbians." *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, February 1, 2008; Hawai'i Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism. *State of Hawaii Data Book*. Honolulu, Hawaii, 2009.

^{xii} Lilikalā Kame'eleihiwa is a Kanaka Maoli academic and Professor of Hawaiian Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Her writing is considered foundational in Hawaiian Studies. See her work, *Native Land and Foreign Desires/Pehea La E Pono Ai?*, Honolulu, Bishop Museum Press.

^{xiii} Ku'umeaaloha Gomes, Director of Kua'ana Hawaiian Student Services at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, email March 1, 2014.

^{xiv} Pauline Guillermo-Aguilar, "Paying Attention: The Importance of Being 'Mahu'".
http://www.apiwellness.org/article_being_mahu.html. Accessed February 27, 2014.

^{xv} 'Fa'afafine' is a term in Sāmoan culture that is used to describe someone born biologically male who lives 'in a manner of' a woman. 'Fa'a' means 'in the manner of' and 'fafine' is 'woman'. Increasingly, it is a word used by Sāmoans who wish to identify with non-heteronormative genders.

^{xvi} Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu has recently become prominent in Hawai'i politics. She served as the head of the O'ahu Burial Council and is now running to be a trustee-at-large position in the Office of Hawaiian Affairs.

^{xvii} Words by Keali'i Reichel and Puakea Nogelmeier. Translation on Huapala Hula Archives page,
<http://www.huapala.org/Maunaleo.html>. Accessed February 28, 2014.