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# Hawaiian style graffiti and the questions of sovereignty, law, property, and ecology

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## Abstract

Based on the ethnographic insight gained from the fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2012 on the island of O‘ahu, this article attempts to capture the aesthetic and symbolic expressions of decolonization in aerosol writing pieces by a crew primarily composed of Kanaka Maoli (“true human being,” indigenous people of Hawai‘i) writers. By focusing on the indigenous aesthetic practice of kaona (“hidden meaning”), the article analyzes the ways in which Hawaiian style graffiti unveils the contested issues of jurisdiction, sovereignty, property claims, and ecological integrity under the prolonged colonial and military occupation. It simultaneously illuminates the decolonial vision brought forth by Kānaka Maoli writers that seeks to transcend and transform the realities imposed by the colonial and occupational power. Through socio-historical contextualization, the article draws parallels between the time of Hawaiian Kingdom and the present, to unravel the integration of ancestral knowledge and contemporary expressions in Hawaiian style graffiti.

## Keywords

graffiti, indigenous aesthetics, ki‘i pōhaku, sovereignty, property, ecology

Writing by Indigenous people is thus a sovereign act.

—Tracy Bunda

## Introduction

The article explores the aesthetic responses to the latest forms of the colonization and belligerent occupation of Hawai‘i among Kānaka Maoli aerosol writers. It pays particular attention to the use of indigenous aesthetic of kaona, or the act of “hiding and seeking meaning” among Kānaka Maoli writers that functions as an “Indigenous decolonial practice” (McDougall, 2016). The invocation of kaona constituted by the location and timing of Hawaiian style graffiti informs us of the fault lines of the geopolitical contestation between the colonial and occupational forces and indigenous existence. The unfolding of kaona through historical and geopolitical contextualization as well as from the perspective of the audience community reveals the aesthetic and symbolic assertion of the original law, sovereignty, property claims, and ecology.

The fieldwork component of this research spanned from 2006 to 2012 when I conducted the site observations of aerosol writings, and formal and informal interviews with active writers, state legislators who introduced the anti-graffiti bills, leaders of anti-graffiti organizations, store owners affected by graffiti, and bystanders at the sites. During the same time, I was part of Honolulu’s underground hip-hop crew (Mo Illa Pillaz/Dugout Studio) as a musician, whose studio served as a quasi-community space for local hip-hop artists (aerosol writers, B-boys/B-girls,

DJs/producers, and Emcees/rappers). The scope of research was thus shaped by our day-to-day interactions between the crew members and with other hip-hop practitioners including active aerosol writers who visited our studio to hang out or for music recordings. Some of the active and former writers who were part of or associated with the crew functioned as research consultants.

As the focus on the research zooms on the kaona of Hawaiian style aerosol writings, the investigative subjectivity is accordingly situated in the liminal zone between the life world of writers and the audience reception of kaona. It is due to the fact that an emphasis on the subjectivity of writers through the emic mode can drastically reduce if not eliminate the multidimensionality of kaona. This is the dilemma that Brandy Nālani McDougall is also faced with in her study of kaona in the contemporary Hawaiian literature. She resolves this dilemma by emphasizing the significance of the receiving audience in the revelation of kaona: “I believe that the practice of kaona can transcend authorial intention, as audiences may detect and read kaona that was not intended but is nevertheless there and perhaps in need of audience to reveal it” (McDougall, 2016, p. 31). Similarly, speaking on the reception of the

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legend of Kamapua‘a (“pig demi-god”) published as a daily series in the Hawaiian language in 1891, Kame‘eleihiwa (1996) underlines the critical role of audience in the unfolding of kaona:

In keeping with Hawaiian conventions, the story doesn’t end with the telling. Now is the time for the audience to evaluate the interplay of kaona in the epic. What are the deeper meanings and lessons to be learned? Is there just one level of kaona or are there several? (p. 144)

Thus, through my conversations or “talk story” about the meaning of aerosol writing pieces as well as sharing of findings with active and former writers and other hip-hop practitioners, I was able to position myself in the community of the kaona receivers to “evaluate the interplay of kaona” as it manifests in Hawaiian style graffiti. Accordingly, while the writers are closely associated with each other, those active and former aerosol writers whom I worked with are not the authors of the pieces explored in this article.

Although the community of kaona receivers in this research can be largely described as Honolulu’s underground hip-hop cultural hub, it turned out to be a far more diverse and dynamic contact zone. As a non-native participant of the Hawaiian Nation through my immediate and extended family ties as well as involvement in the Hawaiian sovereignty movement and the protection of sacred sites since the early 1990s, my insider/outsider status has allowed me to be a contact point in the emerging connectivity between the movement and our hip-hop cultural hub. Moreover, since the studio was located in walking distance from the ‘Iolani palace and biking distance to the Thomas Square, where significant sovereignty-related events and actions take place, some of our crew members and associates became more active in the movement over the years. Consequently, some of the songs that the crew released had strong overtones of self-determination in defiance of the everyday reality of colonial occupation (Mo Illa Pillaz, 2010). The community of kaona reception for this research was thus permeated by the Hawaiian sovereignty movement discourse and its perspectives.

Deferring the discussion on what such discourse and perspectives entail for a moment, I want to address the method of unpacking the kaona of Kānaka Maoli aerosol pieces. The kaona analysis was made possible first by the exemplary pieces by one of the most prolific graffiti crew called AF on the island of O‘ahu during the time of observation. Out of all the pieces I recorded throughout the island, both the AF crew’s and individual member’s pieces exemplified their affirmation of indigenous aesthetics and stylistics as well as its assertion of indigenous existence in the choice of location and timing in displaying their pieces. According to Kavet the “Catalyst,” one of the main organizers of Honolulu’s underground hip-hop scenes, based in the windward district of Oahu (i.e. Waimanalo, Kailua, Maunawili, Kāne‘ohe, and Kahalu‘u districts), the AF crew is composed predominantly of Kānaka Maoli descendants, spearheaded by a veteran Kanaka Maoli writer, Phyto (personal communication, December 3, 2010).

Second, the actual deciphering process of the kaona was twofold. On one hand, it involved the contextualization of the location and timing of a given piece in an event of political significance from the intersection of writers’ community and the Hawaiian sovereignty movement. On the other hand, it also required the assessment of notoriety in getting pieces up in certain location, at certain time. The assessment was done by retracing the writers’ access to the location, consulting my research associates in evaluating the physical and logistical challenges involved in painting the pieces, and also by identifying the contested jurisdiction of the sites (the US City and County, State, Federal, Military, and the Hawaiian Kingdom). Through contextualization and assessment, it became clear that a significant number of the AF crew pieces during the time of observation constituted an aesthetic response to landmark events or sites of jurisdictional fault lines relevant to the significant events. Here, I am presenting the cases that are direct and indirect responses to the events, representing the tightening of the colonial and occupational control on the ‘āina or “homeland that feeds” (Pukui & Craighill Handy, 1972, pp. 2–4). As Paul Lyons and Ty P. Kāwika Tengan (2015) assert, such tightening of control proceeds through “legal systems that have aggressively replaced traditional legalities and that continue to attack legalities designed to protect Native rights” (p. 559).

The responses from the Kānaka writers to the colonial and occupation power weave themselves into a coherent narrative of decolonization through the affirmation of the continuous existence of Hawaiian sovereignty in the openly public yet clandestine aesthetic sphere. Symbolically and aesthetically, the decolonial expressions of Hawaiian style graffiti attempt to reset and alter the colonial and occupational realities of the imposed legality and property regimes, the destruction and desecration of the ‘āina, and its ecological integrity, the ontological and physical violence against Kānaka Maoli. The cases examined here are organized in a chronological order: the anti-graffiti law of 2007, the legality/illegality of the “hidden” military project or the Hawaii Superferry, the desecration by the “hidden” military highway, the contestation over the “property” and Kingdom’s lands under occupation, the transnational (Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation [APEC]) convention of 2011, and the call for continuous struggle made from the Kingdom Government Lands under the US military occupation. Before examining each case, however, there should be preliminary contextualization in the contemporary form of colonial and occupation power, Kānaka Maoli reconstituting lāhui (“Nation”), and the story of Hawaiian style graffiti.

## Hawaiian Kingdom: parallel universe

The allusion to Hawaiian Kingdom has come to assume great importance in the contemporary Hawaiian sovereignty movement due to the landmark events in the 1990s that I will explain shortly. In this article, there will be frequent switching of temporal contextualization between the time of the Hawaiian Kingdom and the present, reflecting

the temporal and spatial consciousness of the movement and Kānaka Maoli writers. Such consciousness makes the assertion of original concepts of law, sovereignty, property, and ecology possible, rising above the realities of the contemporary form of colonization and occupation.

The foundation of the contemporary form of colonization and occupation was installed in the 1980s when Hawai'i ushered in the era of "tourism society" in which overseas-based multinational corporations and the complicit State government collaborated in the "destination resorts" development that combined hotel constructions and various land development schemes including suburban development (Kent, 1993, pp. 164–185). The tourism society coupled with the US military expansionism has significantly undermined the well-being of the island people through the rising cost of living, undue tax burdens, a new ethnic division of labor that confines Kānaka Maoli and other Pacific Islanders to the low-wage service sector, and drastic environmental destruction. In the 1990s and into the millennium, the fundamental structure of colonial and occupational governance has remained intact but with the diversification of developmental projects symptomatic of globalization. The latter included the accommodation of the transnational biotech industry and the implementation of "hidden" military transportation projects (the completion of H-3 highway and the short-lived Hawaii Superferry project). The contemporary form of colonization and occupation has been particularly detrimental to the indigenous existence through the displacement of Kānaka Maoli from their land base, the commodification and outright destruction of the 'āina, and the desecration of the sacred sites.

In response to the contemporary colonial and occupational power, the Kānaka Maoli community with its allies has led a grassroots movement to protect sacred sites, burial sites, water, kalo, ecological integrity, and indigenous way of life from further destruction and colonization (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2014). One of the main shifts of paradigm that took place in the movement since the late 1990s in the early 2000s is the affirmation of the nationhood and nationality of Hawaiian Kingdom. The retrieval and public display of the 1897 anti-annexation petition (a.k.a. the "kū'ē [to oppose, resist, protest] petition") facilitated by Noenoe Silva in 1997 "moved many Kānaka toward the independence side of the movement spectrum" (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2014, p. 19). The independence perspective was also reinforced by the Lance Larsen versus Hawaiian Kingdom case at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA, hereafter), in which a Hawaiian subject filed a suit against the Hawaiian Kingdom for its failure to protect its citizens from the occupier. The effect of these landmark events on the movement is twofold. One is the awareness and discourse of the continued existence of Hawaiian state sovereignty. The other is the rediscovery and embracing of the Hawaiian Kingdom, of its laws, policies, and leadership.

Although the PCA could not decide on the continued existence of the Hawaiian State, it did re-recognize the Hawaiian Kingdom as a State party that "existed as an independent State recognized as such by the United States of America, the United Kingdom and various other States"

(Lance Larsen v. Hawaiian Kingdom, 1999–2001). The discourse in the movement, however, aligned itself with the argument made at the PCA that the Hawaiian Kingdom continues to exist according to the international law of occupation. Keanu Sai (2004), a Kanaka Maoli international legal scholar who represented the Hawaiian Kingdom, goes so far as to insist that Hawai'i has been occupied but not colonized. In actuality, (settler) colonialism and occupation are intertwined and not mutually exclusive; nonetheless, the emphasis on occupation has enabled Kānaka Maoli to embrace the continuous existence of lāhui transcending the historical disruptions wrought by the colonial and occupational power. It has encouraged the movement and individuals to challenge the imposed colonial and occupational realities by asserting the rights and titles based on the original jurisdiction. Accordingly, the US sovereign authorities have been constantly met with the assertion of Hawaiian subjects and original land titles in courts and through diplomatic missives.

The discovery of the kū'ē petition movement and the continuing existence of the Hawaiian State also meant the revisiting of Hawaiian Kingdom law, policy and leadership by Kānaka Maoli. As I will discuss in conjunction with the 2011 APEC convention, Kamehameha I's Kānāwai Māmalahoe as the first law of the archipelago has become a decolonial tool to not only question the validity of the settler colonial laws but also to protect Kānaka Maoli from the displacement and violence perpetrated by the colonial and occupational power. This is because Kamehameha I's law unequivocally declared the universal protection of the commoner's right to exist against the abuse by those in power including himself. The land title claim based on the 1848 Kingdom-wide land division called "Māhele" has also become a tool of decolonization to reclaim ancestral lands and protect their lands from usurpation by the settler state as in the dispute over the State of Hawai'i attempt to sell the "ceded lands" that will be discussed later. Moreover, the revisiting of the Hawaiian Kingdom also facilitated the reevaluation of leadership exemplified by the sovereigns like Kauikeaouli (Kamehameha III), Kalākaua, and Lili'uokalani in a new light such as their international diplomatic strategy and crisis governance. Finally, beyond the technical aspects of law, title, rights, and sovereignty, the renewed interest in Hawaiian Kingdom among Kānaka Maoli has consolidated their homage to the foundational Hawaiian cultural values that were codified by the Hawaiian State. As we see in the following, for Kanaka Maoli writers, the shift of discourse to the continuing existence of the Hawaiian State flipped the script where the presumed illegality of their writings constitutes the evidence of illegal occupation that outlaws the continuity of their cultural practice in a new form and environment.

### **Hawaiian style graffiti and kaona**

Noenoe Silva (2004, p. 5) analyzes the use of kaona in the late-19th-century Hawai'i that served as a clandestine communicative channel between Kānaka Maoli as they gathered



**Figure 1.** Petroglyph Lettering 'O Ke Kahiko at Anaeho'omalu, Hawai'i (Bishop Museum [www.bishopmuseum.org](http://www.bishopmuseum.org))

strength to defend the Lāhui against the settler colonial power aligned with the US imperialism:

Songs, poems, and stories with the potential for kaona, or “hidden meanings,” presented even greater opportunities to express anticolonial sentiments. People made use of these forms, and they created and maintained their national solidarity through publications of these and more overtly political essays in newspapers.

In the contemporary context, however, the practice of kaona requires a double process of seeking ancestral knowledge and applying it to the present context of reconstituting nationhood under the prolonged colonial occupation, as McDougall (2016) elucidates,

Kaona’s propensity for engaging and relating both ancestral knowledge and contemporary experience make it particularly suited as a tool for decolonization, because such movements must continually challenge and transform colonially constructed realities and replace them with decolonial visions. (p. 49)

Prime, one of the pioneer Kānaka Maoli aerosol writers, of Hawai'i, talks about the significance of Kaona as an aerosol writer: “Speaking from the [perspective of] writing culture, I see kaona in the language, the land, the ‘aina and the ocean. Kaona is everywhere” (personal communication, May 9, 2018). He finds the fundamental kaona of Hawai'i's aerosol writing culture in flipping or overturning the meaning of “vandalism” and “criminality” normally associated with the act of aerosol writing. “How can you call writing culture as vandalism against the property when the property is based on the desecration, displacement, and ‘vandalism’ against our iwi (ancestral bones) like what happened to those where Sam’s Club stands now?” (personal communication, May 9, 2018). This sentiment is shared by a local writer Flux who expresses his vandal identity vis-à-vis the suburban development: “When they [developers] destroy the land to build roads and buildings, they better know the consequence of what they are doing” (personal communication, July 7, 2007). They are quite similar and yet the latter seems to see the notion of vandalism more literally, and thereby consciously positioning himself as a vandal born out of land development without giving space for the kaona to emerge.

For Prime and other Kānaka Maoli writers, kaona is what allows them to be in touch with their ancestral knowledge.



**Figure 2.** Waiahole 1862 at Anaeho'omalu, Hawai'i (Bishop Museum [www.bishopmuseum.org](http://www.bishopmuseum.org))

Prime talks about his involvement with writing culture as a “refuge” in the colonial context of displacement and erasure:

They took away our culture and then hip hop became that replacement. And then the writing portion of it gave me a sense of freedom to express my thoughts and then, yeah, self-identity as well. (Tao & Veney-Malcou, 2014)

Dek-1, who is from one generation after Prime, articulates the kaona of writing culture in the continuity of ancestral cultural practice: “You call it graffiti today. But our ancestors were in this business long before” (personal communication, June 11, 2007). Alluding to the indigenous tradition of ki'i pōhaku or petroglyphs, Dek-1 in effect pushes the label of criminality and vandalism back to the colonial and occupying power that tries to criminalize the continuation of their cultural practice. Prime chimes in with Dek-1 in the articulation of an intimate connection between their ancestral art and aerosol writing: “Writing culture is all about locations. Just like how petroglyphs were placed at the sites of significance” (personal communication, May 9, 2018). As it turns out, ki'i pōhaku as an archetype of the aerosol writing in Hawai'i historically exists not only as symbols but also as a letter style.

According to J Halley Cox and Edward Stasack (1970, p. 53), Hawaiian petroglyphs were sometimes accompanied by “many names, enigmatic lettering, and some dates, even in some of the old sites.” The letter petroglyphs (Figures 1 and 2) emerged between the early 1820s, the arrival of the Calvinist missionaries, and the 1860s when petroglyphs began to wane due to the disappearance of small villages and the decline of movement by foot and horse carriage (Cox & Stasack, 1970, p. 53). The printers who accompanied the first two contingents of missionaries (1820 and 1822) introduced letters and fonts to Kānaka Maoli. With the standardization of letters for the written Hawaiian language in 1826, widespread dissemination of the Hawaiian alphabet occurred among the indigenous population (Spaulding, 1930, pp. 32–33).

This dissemination gained momentum after the mission schools opened their doors to the commoners in 1825, whereby the enrollment increased from 2,000 in 1824 to 45,000 in 1829 (Walch, 1967, p. 363). According to Albert J. Schütz (1994, pp. 153–182), the spread of literacy was aided not only by the missionary schools but also by the commoners’ enthusiasm in sharing their “newfound fascination with the printed words” with one another beyond the formal channels of education. As Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate, Hawaiian



**Figure 3.** Kī'i Pōhaku, undisclosed location, O'ahu (photo by author).



**Figure 4.** “Phyto,” North Nimitz Highway, Honolulu. (Photo by author).

petroglyph writers reworked the fonts provided by the missionaries to create their own styles for the stone surfaces in the natural landscape.

The affinity between kī'i pōhaku and aerosol writing involves more than the use of letters. One of the methods of kī'i pōhaku alongside engraving and pecking (striking the surface with a tool) is bruising. The surface is bruised or scratched and in turn gets varnished by manganese and iron-oxidizing microorganisms that inhabit the newly cleared surface, which biochemically colors the affected surface of the rock (Dorn, Nobbs, & Cahill, 1988, pp. 688–689; Krinsley, 1998). Similar to how graffiti's petro-chemical alteration of the industrial surface enhances symbolic and aesthetic diversity, the biochemical alteration of the rock surface, as seen in Figure 3, enhances biodiversity by creating a microecosystem on the rocks. These writings provided a space for other life forms to come to life and



**Figure 5.** “Absolute Faith,” South King St., Honolulu. (photo by author)

create an ecosystem of their own. Thus, kī'i pōhaku is very intimate not only with the natural landscape but also with the “original” ecology that values all forms of life in a web of interdependence. This is enshrined in one of the cosmogony chants, the Kumulipo: “In the first division are ‘born’ (hanau) or ‘come forth’ (puka) species belonging to the plant and animal world, in the second appear gods and men” (Beckwith, 1972, p. 37).

It is in this context that one can properly decode the kaona of Phyto, the leading figure of the AF crew that will be examined in the following (Figure 4). The meaning of the name, Phyto, relating to “plants” is most likely hidden from the spectator until he or she looks it up in the dictionary or encounters it in biology class. As the meaning unfolds, the proliferation of the kaona of Phyto begins to unveil a narrative of the symbolic ecosystem feedback that re-introduces the forces of nature back to the surface of the colonial and occupational infrastructure. Thus, Phyto, from the same generation as Dek-1, pays double tributes to the ancestral knowledge in the kaona tradition and the original ecology.

Both Prime, the pioneer practitioner, and Buzz-1, the pioneer participants, agree that the writing culture in Hawai'i emerged as a “package deal” with other elements of hip-hop culture (i.e. B-boying/B-girling, MC-ing, and DJ-ing; Buzz-1, personal communication, July 1, 2015; Tao & Veney-Malcou, 2014). The explosion of B-boying (or “break dancing”) took place in 1980 thanks to what they call the “hip hop missionary,” Crazy Legs of the Rock Steady Crew, who got stranded in Honolulu and was hosted by the family from Papakōlea, a Honolulu district with high concentration of Kānaka Maoli (Prime, personal communication, May 9, 2018). The “hip hop style” aerosol writing followed immediately after the B-boy explosion with the proliferation of crews such as Union of the Style Artists, Union of Style, Design Madness, and Humanist Party that housed writers like Prime, 2-Shy, Acrylic, Nakaz, Triad3 (Buzz-1, personal communication, July 1, 2015; Prime, personal communication, May 9, 2018). Preceding the publication of *Subway Style* in 1984, the most influential photo book on New York wild style of the early 1980s, the pioneer writers in Hawai'i had to resort to other sources like heavy metal album covers (Prime, personal communication, May 9, 2018). The following contingents of “hip hop missionary”

between the mid-1980s to the early 1990s included a pioneer New York wild style writer, P.H.A.Z.E 2 who took one of the local writers, East3 as his mentee (Buzz-1, personal communication, 1 July 2015).

While contemporary graffiti styles currently in vogue such as the new bubble style (letters inflated like bubbles in a complex manner) evolved out of the wild style in which letters have become too deformed to be legible, the Hawaiian style seems to adhere to the letter without excessive deformation, as Dek-1 explains, “Hawaiian style sticks to the [legibility of the] letter” (personal communication, June 11, 2007). Prime unravels the conceptual foundation of Hawaiian style from a Kanaka Maoli writer’s perspective:

[W]hat we have done is program back ourselves into English. But, what if we reprogram ourselves back to the ancient ways . . . [I]magine taking all of these letter structures and bar structures and bending it so that it fits our culture structure, our value structure. What does that look like? (Tao & Veney-Malcou, 2014)

Kānaka Maoli aerosol writers attempt to indigenize aerosol writing after the “hip hop missionary’s” arrival seem to resonate with the Ki’i Pōhaku writers of the Kingdom time who appropriated the letters and fonts brought by the missionary to bend them to fit the natural landscape and their cultural practice. Let us now examine how the kaona practice of the Hawaiian style graffiti plays out in the landscape of the contemporary form of the colonial and occupational power from the audience community perspective.

### Anti-graffiti law and “hidden” military projects

Immediately after the Hawai’i State Legislature passed Act 196 in the summer of 2007 that mandated the removal of graffiti by “offenders” and the guardians of minor “offenders” as their community service requirement, the frequency of graffiti seemed to decline. In his study of the politics of graffiti in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Andrew P. Lynch (1998) examines the anti-graffiti legislation as an integral part of the governmental restructuring, inasmuch as it is designed to outsource its authority to the “community.” The anti-graffiti legislation thus redefines the notion of community whereby each community can have a sense of “ownership” over its “social problems” and is allowed to act upon them. The state’s redefinition of “community” here on the island of O’ahu has spawned several anti-graffiti organizations that undertake the job of “buffing” or painting over graffiti in industrial primers. As we shall see, the renewed sense of community promoted by the anti-graffiti legislation hinges on the protection of the property interest in the neighborhood, which is represented as the well-being of the community.

In spite of tougher penalties and the policing power augmented by anti-graffiti organizations, AF did not curtail its activities. Indicative of the heightened sense of risks, abbreviated crew names appeared more frequently than individual names immediately after the enactment of anti-graffiti

legislation. However, it wasn’t long before the AF crew openly defied the air of intimidation and fully spelled its acronym in a large piece, “Absolute Faith,” on the wall along King Street (Figure 5). The site is situated toward the east end of one of the city’s main one directional thoroughfares through which the traffic flows from downtown Honolulu eastward to the University/Moiliili area. The site is at the center of the zone where two anti-graffiti organizations—the one with a faith-based organization and the other associated with the neighborhood board—were actively engaged in their voluntary graffiti eradication efforts. The kaona of AF’s “theological” piece, therefore, constitutes its assertion of the legitimacy of aerosol writing that transcends the authority of statutory law and property ownership that the new legislation consolidated. At the same time, the timing of this piece conceals another kaona that questions the legitimacy of the statutory law in Hawai’i. Its emergence in early November 2007 happened to coincide with Governor Linda Lingle’s successful attempt to urge the legislature to enact a new law of exception for the Hawaii Superferry to operate in Hawai’i without environmental compliance, circumventing the earlier State Supreme Court decision.

As Kaua’i-based journalist Joan Conrow (2009) argues, the real purpose of the Hawaii Superferry was not to offer an alternative inter-island transportation but “to build and test a military prototype vessel at very little risk to the investors.” The Superferry’s lack of legitimacy became clear to most of the public in Hawai’i in the summer of 2007 when the people of Kaua’i took direct action to stop the ferry from docking at their harbor, when hundreds of surfers, paddlers, and swimmers formed a physical barrier in the water (Paik, 2009). The Kaua’i peoples’ objection to the Superferry was primarily ecological: the protection of endangered mammals and the avoidance of invasive species. The “Absolute Faith” by the AF crew along with the passing of Act 2 by the Hawai’i Legislature marked a historic moment in which the “illegality” of graffiti as such appeared completely absurd when the executive and legislative branches were in open violation of their own environmental statutes. The Hawai’i State Supreme Court, however, officially overturned Act 2 on March 16, 2009 (Shafer, 2009).

One of the most prolific and notorious writers of the AF crew during the period of my observation was “Spyr.” Spyr’s most inspiring piece in the crew’s home base was a “throw-up,” a quickly executed piece of “AF” painted over the road sign, “Kaneohe MCBH” (“Marine Corps Base Hawaii”), on the H-3 highway overpass over the Kamehameha highway in early 2007 (Figure 6). One of the criteria for notoriety in the world of aerosol writing is the element of surprise or unexpectedness, which can be achieved by putting a piece up at the site that involves grave risk of injury or even death. The notoriety factor can also be enhanced by the jurisdictional authority of the site such as the federal authority as opposed to the state or the city and county. Spyr had already achieved his notoriety at the barrier wall of a dangerous curve of Likelike Highway and the Kaneohe post office in 2006. Spyr pushed the envelope by placing his “throw up” on the road sign that



**Figure 6.** “AF-Spyr,” H-3 Highway, Kaneohe (Photo by author).

hangs 20 feet above the ground. This particular road sign and its location are very significant since they expose the H-3 highway, the latest intrastate highway opened in 1997, as part of the backbone of the US global war machine, connecting three major naval and air bases. By painting over the road sign that “hides” the military presence in acronym, Spyr symbolically “desecrates” a critical power line of the US military complex, whose construction entailed the destruction of the ancient heiaus (temples) and other sacred and significant sites (Kawaharada, 2015). Such double negation as—“desecrating” the symbol of desecration—as a critique of the global war machine challenged the windward commuter’s normalized perception of H-3 through the practice of kaona by means of placement.

### Property and law: US Supreme Court decision on the Hawaiian sovereign lands

The crux of legislations and arguments against graffiti boils down to the alteration of the appearance of property without permission. The “criminality” of aerosol writing is thus based on perceived “willful disregard” of the very notion of “property” in the context of private ownership. It is quite ironic that the highest US judicial authority blatantly disregarded the “sanctity of private property” in its decision on the fate of the “ceded land” (Hawaii v. Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 2009). It was an appeal case from the Hawai‘i State Supreme Court over the proposed sale of the “ceded lands” that were originally the Crown Lands and Government Lands. The “Māhele” or the land division proclamation of 1848 defined the Crown Lands as the private property of the sovereign, “subject only to the rights of the Tenants (i.e. ‘the actual possessors and cultivators of soil’),” and were defined by the kingdom law as “inalienable and shall descend to the heirs and successors of the Hawaiian Crown forever” (Alexander, 1882, pp. 12, 25–26). The Government Lands were defined as the “property of the Hawaiian Kingdom subject to the direction and control” of the sovereign (Alexander, 1882, p. 12). King Kamehameha III’s rationale for the Crown Lands was to avert “the danger of

confiscation in the event of his island being seized by any foreign power” (Alexander, 1882, pp. 15–16). In the aftermath of the 1893 coup d’état, the Republic of Hawaii appropriated those lands without the transfer of deeds (Liliuokalani, 1898/1964). After the USA annexed Hawai‘i thorough Joint Resolution in 1898, the lands were transferred to the USA as “ceded lands” to be held in trust for the benefit of the “Native Hawaiians” (Van Dyke, 2008). The Office of Hawaiian Affairs, as the plaintiff, was created in 1978 as a state agency to institutionalize the State of Hawai‘i’s fiduciary duties to the “Native Hawaiians.” The agency’s programs have been funded by the revenues accrued from the “ceded lands.”

The previous decision regarding this case by the State Supreme Court in 2008 halted the proposed sale until the “Native Hawaiian’s” land claim is settled. In its decision, the Hawaii Supreme Court quoted extensively from the so-called Apology Resolution (1993), which acknowledged the “illegal overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii” as well as the “inherent sovereignty of the Native Hawaiian people.” The US Supreme Court, by contrast, pivoted its argument on the US Congressional Act of 1898 (the “Newlands Resolution”) in lieu of the “Apology Resolution” of 1993. The Court argued that while the former extinguished the Hawaiian Kingdom Crown’s private property title, the latter lacks the force of law or the “legal effect.” The ruling accentuated one of the most burning questions in the Kānaka Maoli community on how a US domestic law could legally extinguish the sovereignty and the private property title that belonged to an independent nation state, a treaty party with the USA since 1849 that has never been abrogated. The dispute over the US occupation of Hawai‘i had already entered into the realm of international jurisprudence at the PCA (Lance Larsen v. Hawaiian Kingdom, 1999–2001) in which the tribunal “underlined” the “proposition that Hawaii was never lawfully incorporated into the United States, and that it continued to exist as a matter of international law.” Given this developing international juridical context, the Supreme Court of the United States’ (SCOTUS) decision seemed to merely confirm the incompatibility of the US sovereign authority with the original land claims rooted in the Hawaiian Kingdom and international law.

In terms of its logic of law and property, the SCOTUS betrayed the fact that the “sanctity of private property” is contingent upon the degree to which the property is integrated in the US legal and economic order. One of the anti-graffiti organization leaders, who is also a “planned community” property manager, provided a valuable insight into this “logic” from a different angle (Martin Cheung [pseudonym], personal communication, July 11, 2007). He extends the concept of “private property” to the public space (e.g. highways, bus stops, and parks) where graffiti tends to sprout, by defining it as part of the “property” of the government. Any alteration of the surface without the authorization of the government, according to him, is an act of “criminal property damage.” Couching the public space or public property in the concept of property ownership in effect obliterates the two inter-related concepts: “public space” and the “commons.” As a “planned community” property



manager, Mr. Cheung's understanding of public space as the state's "property" reflects the view of society from the vantage point of a "gated community," whose citizenship is exclusive and based on the financial power. The State, according to his logic, functions as the security apparatus that ensures the sanctity of private property for the property owners who pay their property tax to the State in like manner as the "association fee." According to his "gated community" logic, property owners have much higher stakes in the condition of the "governmental property" than non-property owners, as it directly affects the monetary value of their private property. The discourse of the anti-graffiti organization leader/property manager and that of the US Supreme Court converge on the point that it is not necessarily the validity of law but rather the sheer strength and vigilance of the security apparatus that ultimately guards and validates the private property ownership.

When graffiti enters the sanctity of property, it is often described as an "act of violence" against property (S.B.228, Relating to graffiti, 2007), even though graffiti is undoubtedly one of the most non-violent means of expression. Such perception of "violence" feeds back to the legislation of much tougher laws to augment the policing power of the State and its outsourced authority. However, as far as its constitutive and foundational aspect is concerned, the violence that some perceive in graffiti can be traced back to the "original" violence that graffiti happens to expose. The "original" violence as *kaona* is rooted in the forceful implementation of the developmental paradigm on the island community. Perhaps the graffiti metaphor can be extended to the aforementioned SCOTUS decision to better understand the constitutive or law-giving violence that it sought to paint over.

The perceived violence of aerosol writing is parallel to the situation when the Kānaka Maoli remind settlers and tourists of the "original" sovereignty. Such reminders by the indigenous people are often perceived as "divisive," "racist," "offensive," and even "violent." The negative perception is revealed, for example, in the micro-colonial power which resulted in the expulsion of a Kanaka Maoli host of the radio show called "The Song of Sovereignty" from a community radio station in Kaua'i (Eagle, 2008). The colonial settler hostility to a strong indigenous expression and presence represents a displaced reaction to the very violence with which the colonial settlers have established their existence upon the land without valid legal and ontological foundation. The colonial settlers' hostile mentality can be clearly seen in the settlers' unconscious and daily affirmation of the doctrine of *terra nullius* ("uninhabited land"). The violence involved in upholding the illusion of *terra nullius*, accordingly, materializes itself as the destruction of sacred sites, coercive displacement, criminalization/incarceration, and other genocidal acts against Kānaka Maoli.

The settler colonial power's act of displacing its lack of foundations with the hostility toward a strong indigenous presence is indeed analogous to the act of "graffiti eradication" by the state, city and county, and anti-graffiti organizations. All it does is to simply hide the "original" vibrancy with pallid industrial primers, as if it were reenacting the

original violence. By contrast, the aboriginal concept of sovereignty is full of life forces. When the British officially restored sovereignty to Hawai'i via Admiral Thomas in 1843 after a brief period of British occupation instigated by Admiral Paulet, Kamehameha III made an official declaration of independence: "Ua mau ke ea o ka aina i ka pono" ("The sovereignty of the land has been continued because it is pono [in harmony]") (Silva, 2004, p. 37). The word "ea," which means "life," "breath," and "air," delineates the original concept of "sovereignty" that is intimately linked with "pono" as the state of ecological balance or a harmony with "all life forces" (Blaisdell, Lake, & Chang, 2005, p. 375).

### **The 2010 "anti-graffiti" law, APEC meetings, and transnational sovereign power**

The fallout from the global economic crisis of 2008 in Hawai'i became visible as a drastic decline in tourism, which in turn produced a serious deficit crisis for the State of Hawai'i. The state resorted to austerity measures that cut back the working hours of city and county and state employees as well as public school instructional days through furloughs.

The austerity paradigm induced by the global economic downturn encouraged the state to seek remedies in accelerating the transnational integration of Hawai'i's economy. The accommodation of transnational enterprises such as Hawaii Superferry and the biotech industry is one of the state's main responses to the negative effects of globalization. Accordingly, the Honolulu City and County and the East West Center, a federal research and education organization, made a pitch for Honolulu to host the APEC convention with the White House and State Department in June 2009. Six months later, President Obama officially announced the hosting of the APEC convention in Honolulu (Dingeman, 2009). As the transnational convention approached, the state seemed to have snapped out of its furlough pause and started to resume its effort to eliminate the signs of life from the streets.

During the 2010 State Legislative session, the lawmakers passed by far the most punitive measures against "graffiti offenders." They introduced the site-based punishment in which "offenders" will be responsible for the removal of any graffiti that would be painted within 100 yards of the original site for 2 years after the conviction (H.B. 2129, 2010). When the legislature was discussing whether or not to extend the site boundary from 100 to 250 yards during spring of 2011, Muse and Clito of the AF crew appeared on the vacant "for lease" buildings right across from the Hawaii Convention Center where the upcoming APEC meetings were to be held (Figure 7). The timing of their writing coincided with the official announcement of the APEC through the local media outlets. AF's choice of location called the attention of the passersby to the stark contrast between the signs of the declining local economy symbolized by vacant buildings and the monolithic presence of the Hawaii Convention Center right across the street. The *kaona*



**Figure 7.** “Clito,” Kapiolani Blvd. and Kalākaua Ave., Honolulu. (Photo by author)

conjured up by the timing and location of Muse and Clito started to unfold itself as the APEC convention began.

This dominant exhibition of transnational sovereign power and its consequences via APEC in early November 2011 resulted in the eradication of the “homeless,” graffiti, and the life of a young native male. Hosting the heads of the states from 21 member nations, the APEC meetings illuminated the contour of transnational sovereign power as it spread over Honolulu. Emblazoned on its brand of the “free trade” agreement called the Trans-Pacific Partnership, APEC’s transnational sovereign power imposed a set of neoliberal policies on the so-called “Pacific-rim” nations that has “devastating effects for indigenous peoples, farming and fishing communities, workers, women and poverty stricken people in Asia and the Pacific” (Fujikane, 2012, p. 190).

The security for the US high officials and foreign dignitaries involved 48 agencies centralized at the secret location in Honolulu (Zimmerman, 2011). A few days prior to the start of the conference, one of the US State Department’s secret agents in charge of diplomatic security was out bar-hopping with his friends in Waikīkī into the early morning. He encountered a couple of young local males at McDonald’s restaurant, engaged in an altercation, and ended up shooting and killing an unarmed 23-year-old Kanaka Maoli named Kollin Keali’i Elderts. As the news began to reach the community, Honolulu was placed under high security, or de facto martial law, where the National Guard was stationed in the key points in addition to the deployment of armed agents around Waikīkī and the Ko’olina resort (another site of the conference located 30 miles from Waikīkī) both on the land and in the ocean.

During the trials in 2013 and 2014—both of which ended up in hung jury—rallies and marches were held to demand for justice for Elderts. A Kanaka Maoli physician Kalama Niheu (2014), who headed the group called Justice for Kollin Elderts Coalition, linked the incident to the excessive vigilance of the security apparatus under the military and transnational occupation:

The people of Hawai’i are constantly surrounded by military weaponry in plain sight, including tanks, helicopters, battle

ships and submarines. At other times this weaponry is concealed among us in plain clothes, drunk, in fast food restaurants, guns hidden, aggressively vigilant against we, the hostile natives.

Lyons and Tengan (2015, p. 558) also meditate on the shooting as an “act of colonial violence” contextualizing the murder in the colonial and occupational realities: “He was not shot as an American ethnic minority but as a Native person in occupied territory.”

In the wake of APEC, Honolulu City and County passed the “Bill 54,” or Revised Ordinance of Honolulu 11-029, that authorizes the city government to confiscate “personal property” on the public parks and sidewalks. This legislation augmented the city’s power to re-evict “homeless” people who had resettled after the APEC convention. The most devastating effect of this new legislation was the mass removal of the “homeless” indigenous population living in the encumbered area adjacent to the Kea’au Beach Park along the Wai’anae coast in April 2012. It is estimated that over 200 people, the majority of whom are Kānaka Maoli, were displaced in a single day (Hussey, 2012; Kubota, 2012). Prior to the eviction, the city and county distributed a notice among the occupants on the beach. Part of the notice reads:

YOU ARE TRESPASSING ON GOVERNMENT PROPERTY

ALL PERSONAL PROPERTY MUST BE REMOVED FROM THIS AREA BY 10:00 P.M. MONDAY, APRIL 16, 2012 . . . PROPERTY NOT CLAIMED BY JUNE 4, 2012 WILL BE DISCARDED . . . PROPERTY THAT IS PERISHABLE, UNSANITARY, . . . STRUCTURES, PALLETS, AND FENCING WILL BE DISASSEMBLED AND DISCARDED. (City and County of Honolulu, Department of Parks and Recreation, 2012)

Designating the undeveloped area adjacent to the park as “government property” clearly ignores the long-standing notion of “public property” even within the Western legal tradition (Rose, 1986). But what is more problematic is that the discourse of the notice upholds the same logic as the one espoused by the anti-graffiti organizer quoted earlier. In both cases, the concept of “public space,” “public property,” or “commons” is overtaken by the inter-property relations where the market reigns as the supreme authority.

The validity of this particular law is questionable from its fundamental contradiction with the prior law. In the late 18th century, when Kamehameha I centralized the sovereign authority over the archipelago, he made known the foundational “law” called the “Kānāwai Māmalahoe” or the “Law of the Splintered Paddle.” The origin of this “law” goes back to an incident when Kamehameha was still a chief in the midst of war. At one point in his excursion to the other chief’s domain, while he was chasing a family of fisherman, he accidentally had his foot caught in the crevice between the rocks. The fishermen then defended themselves by hitting Kamehameha’s head with the paddle, which made the paddle to splinter. Having survived the attack, and believing his life re-granted by the divine,



**Figure 8.** “Kamehameha I” by Hogchild, South King St. and Wai’ālae Ave., Honolulu. (Photo by author)

Kamehameha proclaimed the “law” of the protection of the commoners (Kamakau, 1961/1992, pp. 125–126). In essence, Kamehameha’s Kānāwai guaranteed the freedom of movement for all, especially for the elderly and children, and assured the safety of their travel by allowing them to “sleep [in safety] on the highway” (Kamakau, 1964, pp. 15–17). The offender who interferes with the commoner’s freedom of movement is punished by death.

Kamehameha’s Kānāwai has served as the foundation for the protection of indigenous way of life throughout history, despite the colonial regime’s attempt to undermine it. The missionaries tried to interject Calvinist law into the Hawaiian Kingdom legal system, for example, the Vagrant Laws (Hawaiian Kingdom, 1842, p. 63) that outlawed activities perceived as “indolence” by the missionaries’ standards. Such activities overlapped with the indigenous cultural practices like gathering, lei making, and surfing (Merry, 2000, p. 237; Sonoda, 2008, p. 99). The time period of the enactment of Vagrant Laws coincided with the proliferation of the original Hawaiian letter style writing in the natural landscape where cultural and gathering practices were carried out. The inscription of the letter on the rocks entailed not only the maintenance of cultural practices in defiance of the colonial pastoral power but also the deformation of a symbol of colonial power (i.e. letters) attuned to the indigenous aesthetic and ecological milieu. In this political context, the act of writing letters on the natural landscape assured the continuity of aboriginal mode of being based on the original law while domesticating and transforming colonial symbolism.

Interestingly, during the APEC convention, the aerosol image of Kamehameha I by Hogchild appeared on the



**Figure 9.** “Phyt,” North Nimitz Highway, Honolulu. (Photo by author)

highway column next to the side walk at the corner of King Street and Waiālae Avenue (Figure 8). At the first glance, it may look like a piece of “street art.” However, given its full context, it turns out to be much closer to a Hawaiian style “throw-up” piece than the street art. The kaona of Hogchild is in its Hawaiian translation, Kamapua‘a, who is noted in the Kumulipo as well as in many local folk legends as

Half-man, half-god, and born in the shape of a pig, this ravisher of ladies and superhuman warrior in battle left his trace upon many a rock formation, misshapen fragment of earth, or mountain ravine made sacred by such association. (Beckwith, 1972, p. 80)

True to its name and the ki’i pōhaku tradition, Hogchild’s elaborate pieces on indigenous mythological themes normally appear on the industrial remnants in the natural landscape such as a water tank on the trail. Therefore, it was exceptional to see Hogchild’s “ravine art” on the street during such an “exceptional” time as the APEC convention when freedom of movement was restricted and the life of a Kanaka Maoli was terminated. Thus, Hogchild’s Kamehameha I at this particular site and during the time of APEC entails a kaona placed under the highway: the original law of the land, sovereignty, and jurisdiction that protect the life of the aboriginal subject and its freedom of movement against the backdrop of the law of exception upheld by the transnational sovereign power.

### Fight for the missing “o”

One of the writing spots that has become conspicuous since 2008 is the industrial area adjacent to the Honolulu International Airport, where AF actively resumed its activity in the aftermath of the APEC graffiti eradication. Passing the industrial area just before the Honolulu International Airport, the walkway is sandwiched between the international transport zone and the US military zone. In the midst of the military golf course and right across from the Honolulu International Airport, there is an

outdoor storage section where old military vehicles and containers are kept. Both the military golf course and the International Airport sit on the Hawaiian Kingdom Government Lands, a site of international jurisdictional contestation (Figure 9).

It is at this intersection that I encountered Phyto's piece once again. As I came close to the container, I noticed that the letter "o" was missing from Phyto's piece. Then all of a sudden, the kaona revealed itself in its phonetic form, which is identical to the word "fight." At this transnational hot spot, "Phyt" stands as a call to defend the 'āina. The missing "o" denotes the interruption and disruption made by the colonial and occupational security forces that prevented the completion of "Phyto" (Dek-1, personal communication, April 22, 2018). Thus, the missing "o" can represent the critical mass with which "Phyto (plant)" can grow back on the 'āina, restoring the state of ecological balance (Seph-1, personal communication, June 3, 2012).

## Conclusion

From its conceptual foundation to the actual application on the landscape of colonial and occupational power, Hawaiian style graffiti amply represents an effective use of indigenous aesthetic practice and cultural values as a decolonial tool. Phyto's omnipresence in the city and suburban landscapes by means of its kaona ("plants") not only adds the layer of original ecology but also retains the "existence of the culture prior to development" (Tao & Veney-Malcou, 2014). The fundamental kaona of aerosol writing, overturning the notions of criminality and vandalism, can be seen in "Absolute Faith" and "Spyr" that expose the illegality and invalidity of settler colonial and occupational power engaged in the destruction of ecological integrity and sacred sites. "Absolute Faith's" challenge against the faith and property-based anti-graffiti organizations also lays bare the ontological violence being committed against the indigenous existence in the name of "property" and through its security apparatus. Spyr unveils the "hidden meaning" of the H-3 highway through the locational kaona. The AF crew's and Hogchild's pieces before and during the APEC convention underlined the resilience of indigenous people overcoming the excessive security apparatus that forcefully displaced homeless people and took the life of a Kanaka Maoli youth. Such resoluteness is amplified by the kaona of "Phyt" that calls for a continuous struggle to retain the original ecological order to move beyond the settler colonial and occupational interruptions and disruptions.

The practice of kaona in Hawaiian style graffiti allows both writers and the community of audiences to connect with the ancestor's (i.e. ki'i pōhaku writers) path that had steadfastly perpetuated indigenous aesthetic and cultural practices against the emerging settler colonialism by transfiguring the symbol of colonial power (e.g. letters and fonts) into their own means of expression. Thus, Hawaiian style graffiti can be seen as the futuristic act of interjecting the original understanding of Hawaiian law, sovereignty, ecology, and cultural values into the present to visualize and hopefully actualize the society in which life, aesthetic expression, and ecology are more valued than property.

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## Glossary

'āina	the home-land that feeds
heiau	temple
iwi	(ancestral) bone(s)
Kamapua'a	a pig demigod
Kānaka Maoli	indigenous people of Hawai'i; Kanaka Maoli (singular)
Kānāwai	
Māmalahoe	law of the splintered paddle
kaona	hidden meaning
ki'i pōhaku	petroglyphs
kū'ē	oppose, resist, protest
Kumulipo	one of the creation chants of Hawai'i
lāhui	nation
Māhele	land division of 1848
pono	state of being in harmony with all life forces
Ua mau ke ea o ka aina i ka pono	the sovereignty (life) of the land is perpetuated in harmony
terra nullius	uninhabited land

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