Book and Media Reviews
Na‘lā’la’ i Fino‘ta Siha (Give Life to Our Languages)!

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According to the Hawaiian political scientist Noenoe Silva, when Queen Lili‘uokalani was imprisoned in 1896, she received messages smuggled to her in newspapers that were used to wrap flowers. She would smuggle messages out in return. These messages were publically printed despite the fact that the usurping Republic of Hawai‘i officials were capable of reading Hawaiian and used this fluency to censor newspapers at this time. However, the communiqués between the queen and her supporters were hidden in kaona, “a practice of layering and veiling meaning as well as of finding meaning” (5). So while her captors could grasp the literal meaning of the printed words, the deeper political meaning, consisting of messages that the queen and her supporters had not given up on each other, eluded them.

McDougall’s Finding Meaning: Kaona and Contemporary Hawaiian Literature is a major contribution to an understudied field. There is a large and growing canon of Hawaiian literature, but there is as yet very little in the way of criticism of this body of work. McDougall’s contribution to the lexicon of Hawai‘i literary criticism is “kaona connectivity [that] describes how kaona, as a practice, requires us to connect with our kūpuna [elders] as well as with each other” (5). It has been said that it takes a large amount of history to create a small amount of literature. The historical basis of McDougall’s analysis is impressive and she shows care in reciting the genealogies of Hawaiian chiefs and gods. She is committed to a colonial/decolonial analysis, which is not at all uncommon for radical Pacific Island writers. But in Hawai‘i, it is worth noting, this is not the only analysis prevalent among activists and activist-scholars. An occupation/deoccupation analysis has supplanted the colonial analysis in some quarters. McDougall continually refers to Hawai‘i’s “colonial” history, but later in the book, she references “occupation.” For me as a political scientist, these terms seem mutually exclusive, although Hawaiian scholars positioned differently might disagree, such as J Kēhaulani Kauanui in her 2016 article “Traversing the Hawaiian Nationalist Political Gulf” (Hūlili: Multidisciplinary Research on Hawaiian Values 10:83–100). However, it is not clear whether the frame at all affects a literary analysis such as this.

McDougall’s choice of works is interesting in that it makes no real
distinction between established writers, such as Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl—whose play *Ka Wai Ola* is adeptly dissected—and slam poets, in some cases still in their teens. Perhaps no such distinction exists, and it is encouraging that this young generation can embed kaona in their works. McDougall’s analysis of Kneubuhl’s play accentuates its theme that Hawaiians (even those who are highly flawed, like the character Uncle Liko) can retain a sense of connectivity to ‘āina [the land] and a certain dignified wisdom despite the ravages of colonialism. McDougall’s analysis of the poems of Jamaica Osorio leads to an examination of He *Kumulipo*, the foundational mytho-poetic Hawaiian work that needs more such analysis. In this sense also, *Finding Meaning* is a welcome contribution. McDougall does draw a sharp distinction between Kanaka Maoli and non–Kanaka-authored texts on Hawaiian topics. She draws on Mary Kawena Pukui’s debate with a foreign linguist to make a compelling case that privileges a Kanaka view in the interpretation of kaona and meaning making (29–31).

An issue with works of this sort—about a local topic, but published by a continental press—is that of audience. At times the book wavers between ideas that would be well known to Hawai’i readers but difficult for outsiders, as well as some that would challenge even local readers. One wonders how foreign readers will apprehend this material, interspersed as it is with Hawaiian words. But this is not unusual in scholarly books, and McDougall’s inside-outside positioning is one of the book’s strengths, including its overview of the Hawai’i publishing scene from a detached, yet still Hawaiian, perspective. McDougall is not beholden to the local publishing scene she critiques, yet she is still intimately familiar with it. She traces the history of publishing of and by Hawaiians and shows that Hawaiians are very far from parity in being represented—and more importantly, in representing themselves—in the local literary scene.

One thing a reader might find curious is that there is little in the way of an exposition of ancient kaona. McDougall’s analysis of Pukui’s work is very important in that it provides some foundation in traditional Hawaiian folklore for her examination of kaona in contemporary Hawaiian literature—perhaps that is project enough.

Possibly emphasizing her anticolonial stance, McDougall makes a surprising move in chapter 1, switching to Hawaiian mid-sentence: “As an aloha ‘āina and haumana ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i (student of the Hawaiian language), nunui ka mahalo me ke aloha o‘u no nā hua o nā kupuna mālamalama, no ka na‘auao lipolipo a nā kupuna e ‘ike pono ‘ia ai i ko mākou ‘ōlelo makua hine wale nō” (30). A literal translation might be: “as a Hawaiian patriot and student of the Hawaiian language, great are my thanks and love [aloha] for the words [hua] of the enlightened ancestors, and for the deep [lipolipo: the “deep, blue black” referenced in the *Kumulipo*] knowledge of the ancestors properly understood only in our mother tongue.” As her book is about kaona, it is safe to assume that in this unusual statement there is
more, perhaps much more, than meets the eye, and “to be in on the joke, [we] would need to have some shared history and experience” that we may be lacking (32).

One of the most widely published of Hawaiian poets, McDougall intersperses her poems as epigraphs throughout the book. These often magnificent works give readers an affective sense of what is emphasized throughout the book, the Hawaiian relationship with ‘āina and its attendant deities, such as this example from chapter 3: “Hāloa Naka / There is no need to sweeten / your body’s ripe offering / to suit my open mouth. // I take you in as you are— / the taste of earth and light, / salt-wind sieved through valley rains” (86).

One editorial in a Hawaiian language newspaper in the period after the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy was a story of a woman and her horse. A boorish man from overseas steals the horse and proceeds to use it as if it were his property. The writer of the editorial then asks: “Who is the woman? What is the horse? Who is the man?” The story is signed “Kealoha Aina”—The Patriot—or, as pointed out by McDougall as well as others such as Noenoe Silva (in her 2004 book Aloha Betrayed: Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism), literally “those who love the land.” Finding Meaning offers literature as a way of expressing this love and of “living decolonial.”

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More than a century after the 17 January 1893 coup that toppled Ke Aupuni Mō‘ī o Kō Hawai‘i Pae‘āina (the Constitutional Monarchy of the Hawaiian Islands), we, in academia and the general public, know relatively little about the ‘Ōiwi (Native) men and women who helped lead the Hawaiian nation prior to the Islands coming under non-Native control. In Facing the Spears of Change: The Life and Legacy of John Papa ʻĪi, Marie Alohalani Brown takes up the task of bringing us all much closer to an ‘Ōiwi man whom US Consul to Hawai‘i Gorham D Gilman characterized as “the most important civilian in the nation” (109). In doing so, Brown, an assistant professor of religion at the University of Hawai‘i, seeks a broader mission—illuminating the intellectual history of her ancestors in order to help reshape the narrated identity of these men and women and the self-identity of ‘Ōiwi of her own era. In this formative publication, Brown achieves these goals and something even more impactful: the buttressing and expansion of an ‘Ōiwi-centered methodological bridge between scholars of today and figures of Hawai‘i’s past.

The life of Ioane Kaneiakama Papa ʻĪi—a man who served in a multitude of eminent government positions under five of the eight mō‘ī