

“If people aren’t locking rocks together,
we ain’t got a story”

Pōhaku by Pōhaku, Connecting Stories of Community Building

Kēhaunani Abad and Ryan “Gonzo” Gonzalez

Some people cleared mangrove, passed rocks from person to person, and locked them together in thick walls, reestablishing fishponds and building communities in the process.

Some focused on the poetic and scientific expressions embodied in mele, oli, and hula, taking on kuleana to mālama relationships among the many forces and facets in nature upon which our lives depend.

Some taught toddlers ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i as others engaged youth through culture and ‘āina, with both efforts giving rise to a Hawaiian education system that has grown a new generation of ‘āina- and community-dedicated leaders.

Some who grew up through this system put their lives on hold, and stood boldly as kia‘i on one of the tallest mountains in the world, through the blazing heat and biting cold, sacrificing everything to stand in aloha for our ‘āina.

These seemingly scattered stories from across our pae ‘āina have been generations in the making. They are interconnected parts of a foundation that’s been built person by person, place by place, pōhaku by pōhaku, upon and among niho stones set centuries ago.

We are writing as humble scribes and mediamakers in the behind-the-scenes work of our lāhui. As storytellers it’s our kuleana to halihali or transmit these stories, amplifying the voices of those on the front lines who are doing the heavy lifting, expanding their reach and influence through the power of media.

* * *

As Maunakea kia‘i assembled at the Pu‘uhonua o Pu‘uhululu in July 2019, and the largest organized kanaka ‘ōiwi movement in recent history was about to begin, the State’s communications and media advisors were unprepared—stuck in the past, relying on their old game plan of live press conferences on statewide TV and traditional news programs slotted in set time frames. Their July 19 press conference

painted a picture of a lawless crowd and divided leaders. Officials concluded by stating that "The Pu'uhonua has fallen apart."

And who could have blamed them for trying to share such a story? For decades, mainstream media had been depicting Hawaiians as unreasonable radicals fighting the system or each other. Activists' ten-minute interviews became ten-second soundbites, stripped of complexity or analysis. The mainstream media guarded the microphone, and even the best journalists were sometimes reined in by higher-ups, mindful of advertisers' wishes and media owners' politics.

The State underestimated the skill of humble, often young community leaders grounded in Hawaiian cultural traditions, long nourished by pōhaku of previous generations. These *kia'i* stood confidently and passionately before and behind the cameras, deftly using social media, a space where the masses were within a click's reach. During the peak of the 2019 Maunakea stand, millions of people were tuning in to several *kanaka*-curated social media profiles fed by a coordinated array of mediamakers, the ripples of each new post swelling and rising like a mighty wave rolling out far and wide. The State and corporate narratives of undisciplined, divided, and disorganized *kānaka* fell flat.

Watching videos of life at the Pu'uhonua, people could see for themselves an orderly community functioning well under clear rules and inclusive roles. They saw how the community-resourced pu'uhonua provided free food, free health care, free education, free child care, free kupuna care, and shelter for all who were greeted warmly by its embrace. The hundreds of thousands of dollars the TMT spent to blanket the airwaves with paid ads could not dampen what the community was creating out in thin air.

From behind an office desk, State officials issued a further statement contending that the Department of Transportation (DOT) controlled Maunakea Access Road and therefore had the jurisdiction to clear it. Braving extreme mauna conditions, *kia'i* broadcasted live from the middle of that road, maintaining that the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands (DHHL) owned it and was bound by law to support the cultural well-being of its native Hawaiian beneficiaries—such as many of the *kūpuna* encamped on the roadway. Through online videos and written pieces by attorneys and researchers, *kia'i* revealed that the DOT had no authority to clear the road and that the DHHL had shirked its legal obligations. Twenty years ago, this "controversy" might have only found a public platform during court arguments, *after* arrests had deactivated and vilified those involved.

Unwavering on many fronts, through years of legal struggles, multiple mauna standoffs, and battles over media narratives, *kia'i* have stood steadfast on their foundation. On the mauna, they stood through the constant threat of State-sanctioned violence and through the challenges of maintaining an encampment for months on end. Only a once-in-several-generations global pandemic, a crisis that has brought the entire world to its knees and "business as usual" to a grinding halt, could prompt a pause in their stance.

While global leaders and State officials struggle to get our broken economy “back on track,” a few Maunakea kia‘i engaged in conversations about how the core beliefs guiding their mauna efforts could lay the groundwork for a compelling response to our COVID crisis. To advance this vision, they reassembled a handful of the same people engaged in protecting Maunakea, including a few members of the mauna media team.

Zooming over mobile phones and laptops, this small band of kānaka created a process to empower community voices to envision a reset of Hawai‘i’s economy: the ‘Āina Aloha Economic Futures (AAEF) initiative. Motivated by an unwavering recognition of the value of our ancestral foundation and the collective intelligence of communities, this effort seeks to achieve a huluhia of Hawai‘i’s economy and political system, placing ‘āina and community well-being at the forefront.

After only a few months, AAEF has evolved into a promising community-led process bringing together thousands of individuals, senior policymakers, businesses, and organizations large and small who have signed on to support the initiative’s commitment to environmental resilience, local sustainable food and energy systems, regenerative industries, capacity building for Hawai‘i’s residents, and cutting-edge innovation as tools for advancing ancestral values. Although technology helped make this happen quickly, the real force moving this initiative forward has been the community’s amplified voices and collective strength, powered by shared kuleana and commitments to aloha ‘āina.

The potential is so compelling that even the mainstream media are producing stories about the community-driven effort, government bodies are adopting the initiative to inform their decisions and policymaking, and both are providing platforms for AAEF voices in this time of huluhia.

Throughout this upheaval and the uncertainty surrounding the future, we have all been forced to consider what will remain standing, what will be shored up, what will be taken apart, and what will be built anew. As we look forward, there’s great promise in stories whose first few moving chapters we are seeing now.

A sixth-grade Kualapu‘u Elementary robotics team, competing before an audience larger than the population of their home island of Moloka‘i, capturing second place in an international competition.

High school students of Hālau Kū Māna Charter School powerfully expressing their convictions of aloha ‘āina through mele and hula while winning the Malia Craver Hula Kahiko Competition.

Ingenious Hawaiian cultural practices and ‘ōlelo brought to life by the elementary students of Kula Kaiapuni o Maui ma Pā‘ia through a reenactment of the mo‘olelo of ‘Ai‘ai, the original architect of Hawaiian fishpond technologies.

The rising generations today are standing on firmer ground, learning lessons and honing skills that Hawai'i and the world will need to thrive. And they're teaching us too, as their stories are reaching millions in Hawai'i and beyond, even increasing enrollments in Hawaiian-focused schools. People are living and sharing the value of what we as k̄naka have always had to offer—most importantly, solutions to some of the most vexing challenges threatening the short- and long-term viability of humanity on this Earth.

We naturally see ourselves along halihali lines, fulfilling our personal kuleana to hāpai pōhaku, recognizing that our individual role only has value when part of a cohesive community. We strive to have the kind of relationship with places that allows us to ensure that they are thriving, and nourish them when they're not. We love creating things *with* nature and of nature. We see places as people, as 'ohana, as the most precious k̄puna from whom we can learn, and who, when cared for, will continue to nurture us. And we make room for more, adding their strength to our lines moving pōhaku forward.

With each story transmitted out across the universe, we invite more people, from wherever they may be, to share in the work and join in to halihali pōhaku. With every pōhaku thoughtfully carried and locked into place, we find ourselves among deeply embedded layers, firmly set generations before us. When we do this, we continue to strengthen a foundation from which we can build a better world.

Alongside a skilled team in the Kealaiwikuamo'o Division at Kamehameha Schools, **Kēhaunani Abad and Ryan "Gonzo" Gonzalez** support collaboration among the seventy-plus schools and organizations of Kanaeokana. One of their primary kuleana is to amplify mo'olelo of, by, and for the lāhui through media, design, and technology. In relation to Maunakea, the authors and Kanaeokana are part of a larger Nā Leo Kāko'o team, whose collective efforts are referred to in this essay.