

New, Old Wisdom—Sprituality, Creativity and Science Reimagined: Ancestral Wisdom for these Times

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❧ BACKGROUND ❧

Ēwe Hānau o kēia manawa—Natives of this time...Invoking the creative spark of our beings as drawn from the afterbirth of who we are.

Educational perspectives from Hawaiian points of view in all areas of Native Hawaiian health are timely and critical to share today, as remarkable and unprecedented collaborations within the Hawaiian community are addressing not only the overall health and wellness of Hawaiians, but a range of additional culturally grounded issues, such as healing from intergenerational/historical trauma, visioning for an alternative system of healthcare, and social justice. Examples of such collaborative efforts include Nā Limahana O Lonopūhā, a consortium of health professionals from a wide range of disciplines; the diverse range of

community, cultural and health related groups involved in the E Ola Mau a Mau project with Papa Ola Lokahi; as well as Kukulukumuhana, another gathering of organizations and members from the community, all of whom are working tirelessly to confront persistent health disparities and improve the health and wellness of Native Hawaiians. The deep and ambitious work of reimagining how our institutions and providers could begin the work of making substantive change in systems thinking laterally, which would more closely align with cultural healing practices, is the direction we are moving together. This coalescing of organizations and individuals is also happening in educational circles as many have worked for years to bring parity and cultural awareness to learning within the school environment and beyond. As an artist and educator I’ve hoped



for this kind of coming together and overlapping of disciplines for a life time—it's happening now.

What this paves the way for is an unprecedented breaking down of silos with groups reaching out across wide ranges of experiences and backgrounds to work together towards the common goal of a thriving “lāhui” (Hawaiian nation). Integration across disciplines is the work at hand, creating venues and opportunities for others to appreciate and apply the ‘ike hohonu, or the deep insights, gathered from the diversity at hand. It is these translations and bridges that we work at creating for others that will enable us also, in some way, to work at being healed ourselves. Premises are important. Truth is paramount, yet misinformation has obfuscated and distracted from what has been historically presented. Historically, our voices had been silenced or widely absent—but no more.

This invitation to contribute to an ever broadening conversation about interventions and initiatives for health and wellness has allowed for a unique opportunity to broaden the scope of this important wala’au, or talk-story,

to include the visual arts. From the perspective of creativity, the visual arts can offer ways for our communities to see and interact with concepts like historical trauma, health, and healing in novel, dynamic, and lively ways. Others in a range of disciplines are experiencing similar “aha” moments of additional insight in terms of appreciating how various divergent modalities may indeed offer added ways of approaching very difficult subject areas (Muirhead 2018).

This mo’olelo (history and story), which centers on how the visual arts can contribute to healing, can also be viewed as part of a comprehensive, cross sector perspective for achieving health using the Nā Poukihi framework (Kaholokula 2013). The “pou kihi” refers to the corner posts of a hale (house). The Nā Poukihi framework covers different domains that should be included when considering Native Hawaiian health and wellness. The first, “Ke Ao ‘Ōiwi,” refers to the requirement to have spaces that nurture and honor culture. The second, “Ka Mālama Nohona” addresses the need to create and enable healthier communities and environments. “Ka ‘Ai Pono” is the



third pou kihi and refers to the ability to access healthier lifestyles and finally, “Ka Wai Ola” refers to achieving social justice. Incorporation of these elements into, for example, a teaching curriculum addressing Native Hawaiian health, assures a thorough, holistic approach and a much broadened perspective. Attention now shifts from illness care to that of taking up the work of resilience and building wellness not only in individuals, but in families, communities, and environments.

Finally, the telling of this story is meant to demonstrate the dynamic and powerful work of the arts as a prayerful offering of a vision toward health. For this narrative, we urge those who claim an inherent right to truth, understanding, potential reconciliation, and willingness to be open to healing—healing that is personal, familial, communal, and more broadly and ambitiously, universal.

❧ **THE ARTIST’S MO’OLELO** ❧ As a practicing artist and educator interested in many of the same issues but through the lens of the visual arts, it is indeed a novel

and ‘storied’ moment to share how the work of a double-sided mural, ‘Āina Aloha, also belongs to this health conversation. A collegial partnership began with Dr. Martina Kamaka and with the University of Hawai‘i John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) in 2016, which has led to a meaningful and ongoing exchange for both of us. We share some of these insights about what has transpired over the past two years as we’ve had a chance to work together assisting others to think differently about issues of historical and intergenerational trauma and social justice. We’ve also shared this work internationally at health conferences in Australia and Aotearoa, to very positive response. We share these insights with you here from the unique perspectives of both an artist and a doctor of medicine.

The persistent power of the arts in all forms is acknowledged as a potent tool of record, expression, function, and beauty for indigenous peoples throughout the world. Historically, within these valued traditional practices, the arts have been seen as invaluable expressions of heritage, legacy, and perpetuation of culture. The story of the

recently created 'Āina Aloha mural is compelling because this is a comprehensive and ever developing account of a large visual piece of art that is still evolving. Intended as accompanying outreach for the film project, *Ku'u 'Āina Aloha—Beloved Hawai'i* (in production), the larger vision of these ensemble works is ambitious in its scope and breadth. As an artist, filmmaker, and educator, my intention was to bring together these various areas to create both a film and outreach mural meant to be taken into various island communities to be shared and used as mutual resources, to assist others in better understanding what has happened historically to Po'e Hawai'i (Hawaiians) and to their homeland. The mural's intended use was to be a talking point to share mo'olelo with audiences after viewing the film. Nonetheless, the mural has started the work of teaching and inspiring the necessary conversations and reflections even as the film's evolution continues.

Although the opportunity to share complimentary educational perspectives from an art educator's point of view is rather unique in this health context, as our shared conversations will demonstrate, this is the kind of welcome exchange that should be a model for others to invest in. Efforts that are cross-disciplinary, incorporating professionals from diverse realms and disciplines, including those that are historically underutilized like the arts, offer a more cohesive, complimentary, and holistic view of who we as Native Hawaiians are and what we need.

For so many in native communities throughout the world, outsider imposed mo'olelo, laws, and conventions have been the ongoing source of historical trauma, loss, unspeakable grief, continuing dysfunction, anger, and pain. We hoped, through this film/mural effort, to present a novel way to begin those deeper, more real conversations of addressing trauma and of taking charge of our own healing through our own understanding of what happened to the elders and to our language, customs, and practices. As a student of all things Hawaiian, it has been compelling to view how our ancestors lived, what they practiced, and how they treated one another and the earth. These were sustaining ideas that we must reinvigorate today in our own communities if there is to be a future for our children and the generations who will come after them.

The invitation to present this mo'olelo about the creation of the 'Āina Aloha mural and its intended purpose in this publication was intriguing. Sharing the backstory of this piece and how it has been received has been truly life

changing for me. This mo'olelo therefore, is humbly offered in service to the greater good, to all those artists and creatives who help the broader community to imagine and envision beyond the confines of walls and limitations that have held so many back, keeping so many in the darkness of fear and ignorance. We honor those too, who toil towards social justice and the work of healing our bodies and spirits.

The work of the mural has no single authorship. It belongs not to one artist or person; nor was it created by one individual. Instead, 'Āina Aloha, the mural is offered by a hui of six individual artists from tremendously divergent backgrounds united in their wish to offer a collective vision of healing for their beloved Hawaiian community. Artists from the Hawaiian community, Al Lagunero, Meleanna Meyer, Kahi Ching, Harinani Orme, Carl Pao, and Solomon Enos, are professionals who committed their time, skills, and visions for the greater good of all in hopes that their work would assist audiences in the healing and educating of their families and communities.

This kind of work is not easily or successfully done as evidenced by the numerous works directed by solo artists on urban walls today, yet an indigenous mindset, one of drawing from the wellspring of who we are, from a collective consciousness is the pressing need of these times. Ours is a truly novel work of researching, sketching, and amassing best ideas and aspects of work to bring together in a final working sketch that will begin the process of our painting, ideating, and creating together. As change is the constant, any improvements/alterations along the way are petitioned by the participating artists—worked with and negotiated.

As the 'Āina Aloha mural project progressed, what unfolded for this tight-knit group of visual art creatives was truly extraordinary. The initial challenge put forth was an opportunity to see if it was possible to paint away pain—historical trauma and whatever else we wanted to attempt. The premise was a bit daunting, but this group had already done five large mural works together in as diverse places as the Sheraton Hotel at Helumoa, Waikīkī, the Hawai'i Convention Center; Camp MokuĀia, Kalihi stream project, and the Pacific Hall at Bishop Museum. Each large mural we've produced in the past has been worked over and over and over until it was completed—all within a weeks' time, from inception, drafting, revising, scaling up, refining to finish. Works have ranged from 10 x 450 linear running feet to 8 x 20 feet. What has been revealed through our work

together is the trust in the process and in the collective vision allows for extraordinary energy exchange, which, in turn, creates its own group intuition. The ‘Āina Aloha mural project was yet another ‘out-of-the-box’ occasion to put the rigors of creativity, “aloha kekahi i kekahi” (love one another), and the deep, traditional process of collaboration to the test.

The collective energies of this group of artists has been remarkable because of the trust, shared purpose, caring for one another, space for the creative process, and respect for the talents brought together. These works have created an alchemy that is truly unbelievable, yet repeatable and profoundly compelling, as the completed body of works underscore. The shared reality for the team continues to be revelatory—as experienced in this ‘Āina Aloha project as well.

During the week of completion for the mural it was decided by the group that more of the mo‘olelo had to be painted—but how and where could this be done? For a portion of the team, the work of with dealing with the pain, historical trauma, and loss was not complete. There was so much of it, and to have covered it up seemed counterintuitive. The assignment was eventually completed, as the pain was literally transformed by the layer upon layer of acrylic paint, into a finished, iconic Hawaiian narrative, yet the pain and sorrow had not really even been touched. How could we address the historical trauma? How could we, literally, paint the pain away? If it was covered up, could it ever be dealt with at all? The resounding answers and expressions from members of the creative team were “We’re not sure, but let’s give this work-in-progress another pass, another try, and see what comes from this next iteration, this next stage....” Where could we do this additional work? Why on the other side of the canvas of course!

What unfolded from that additional conversation and openness has been nothing short of extraordinary and profound. After a hiatus of a year or so, the creative process of this work was continued, envisioning the second side of the canvas dealing completely with pain, loss, historical trauma, grief, horror, and silencing, as well as critically important pieces that would take us all to another realm of understanding. This initially straightforward mural would now become part of a two-sided installation, revelatory for this fact, not to mention the unfolding story that would become its visual voice. The messaging, colors, and composition for ‘Āina Aloha, this double sided mural, would invite

audiences into a world of symbolism—allegorical and iconic mo‘olelo—using key references from Hawaiian traditions and values, historically and contemporarily. This Native point-of-view interfaces often with an oppositional and conflicting world-view.

The first large, painted image of the two murals was a values-based ‘visual telling,’ steeped in reciprocity, reverence, and love for the land and one another, as evidenced on the blue side of the mural. The second mural, painted in response to the first, portrays pain, trauma, and outrage within the folds and forms of cadmium reds and abstracted symbols, symbols representing theft, loss, death, and horror that have come from historical trauma which is universal in nature—as pain is to all of humanity. Surprisingly, the trauma side of the mural has given audiences an abstract and profoundly different entry into a realm of pain that was unanticipated—as the representational and narrative side could never offer. Notable amongst the angst and trauma depicted are novel, remarkable eddies of color and even refuge—teals, greens, and yellows—allowing for healing and safe harbor as the unvarnished, revelatory recounting of the past unfolds. These are meant to represent hopeful, growth filled moments that can offer the viewer some sense of contemplation and hope as they are also portals to the other side, the side representing the narrative of our cultural strengths, guiding us on our journey toward healing and wellness.

The nature of this two-sided mural is not screaming or angry per se, so much as daring, authentic, horrific, and revealing. It is open to interpretation, as a true conversation would invite possibilities of divergent thought—makawalu, or multiple perspectives. It is a story of a culture, its people, and a way of being, now made concrete, meant as a marker standing for a people seeing and responding to the world in a novel way. As an artist in collaboration, our shared practice is a contemporary reinterpretation of history, of our storied past and what we envision for our future together.

❧ THE PHYSICIAN-EDUCATORS’ MO‘OLELO ❧

The challenge for a Native Hawaiian physician teaching in an American medical school is how to address the overwhelming problem of Native Hawaiian health care disparities (E Ola Mau 1986, Aluli et al. 2010, Mau et al. 2009, Wu et al. 2017). This is not only an issue of addressing accreditation standards (Functions 2016), but more importantly an issue of social justice (Universal Declaration of Human Rights

1948, Braveman et al. 2011). The existence, and persistence, of health care disparities is particularly painful when looking at our Native Hawaiian population and our own medical school. While medical education is asked to help students recognize and develop “solutions for health care disparities” (Functions 2016), common sense would indicate that without understanding causes, as in understanding history, how can anyone develop solutions? Surprisingly, the majority of our students entering the JABSOM seemed to know little about Native Hawaiian history, let alone Native Hawaiian healthcare disparities.

In the Department of Native Hawaiian Health at JABSOM, we have a multidisciplinary team of faculty, community, and cultural advisors for our Native Hawaiian related curriculum. The team realized early on that students would never understand Native Hawaiian health disparities without understanding the origins of those disparities. The origins lie in our history, so we set out to teach about our history, the role of cultural historical trauma, and the accompanying losses which lead to current disparities. Special exercises were devoted to getting students to understand the concept of loss and deep pain, a pain which could be transmitted to future generations (intergenerational trauma) and disguised as self-destruction, poverty, and never-ending cycles of despair, anger, and violence.

Interestingly, students grasped the concept of loss quite readily but were left dejected after our sessions. Many asked how to help patients heal from cultural historical trauma. Quickly we realized that we needed to add content on healing from cultural trauma. We looked for resources that address the three elements needed for healing from cultural historical trauma: 1) inclusion of culture, particularly cultural strengths, 2) inclusion of spirituality, and 3) allowing for transformation or therapeutic change (Phillips 2003). We found our answer in a moving and powerful film about an Alaska Native community called “Carved from the Heart” (Frankenstein and Brady 1997). It outlined the impact of trauma and substance abuse in a community and the eventual healing that occurred through reviving the cultural practice of carving and erecting a totem. As great a resource as the film was, we were asked at various times if there was something from within our own Native Hawaiian community that might also serve this purpose.

In September of 2016, there was a loud buzz around the offices in the Department of Native Hawaiian Health about the ‘Āina Aloha mural at Mark’s Garage. The mural

was large (20 feet by 6 feet) and two sided and depicted interpretations of cultural trauma and healing. This we had to see!

To see the mural for the first time was an awe inspiring, gut wrenching experience. We knew instantly that this was the answer to the question of whether there was something from within our own Native Hawaiian community that could illustrate cultural trauma and healing. Questions swirled regarding how to incorporate this mural into our teaching. There were challenges to consider, such as where was the mural going to be in six months when we would have curricular time to address this topic. How would our students be able to see it and interact with it? How would they respond to it?

Thankfully, I knew Meleanna from previous work she had done teaching art with children. We discussed using the mural in our medical school curriculum. She indicated that the mural had been on display at Punahou School and was used as a teaching tool there. Could we do the same? Could we bring the mural to JABSOM?

We were fortunate to get the support of our dean, Jerris Hedges, and our department chair, Keawe Kaholokula, who helped secure the funding that would allow JABSOM to host the mural. Due to its size and the important message it conveyed, we wanted it to be visible and easily accessible for our faculty, staff, and students. The main JABSOM lobby turned out to be the perfect two-month home for the ‘Āina Aloha mural. Thankfully, the mural was in place in time for our colloquium on cultural trauma and healing. A critical piece of the session was bringing Meleanna in to share her story and that of the mural. Students were then encouraged to engage with the mural (both sides), reflect, and draw. Students were asked to draw about aspects of the mural that resonated with them either through self-reflection or through the broader lens of humanity confronting trauma and grief and understanding the power of, and need for, healing.

Our team utilizes experiential learning throughout our curriculum, but this was our first experience with incorporating visual art and having an artist sharing and teaching our students. We recognized that the topic of cultural trauma and healing was too deep and heavy to achieve understanding and empathy through lecture alone. In fact, we knew that other disciplines could probably address it better, but this curricular change was a drastic deviation even for us. We were grateful to find in evaluations that

students ‘got it.’ They understood cultural trauma and the need for tools such as those represented by the mural in helping a health-disparate population heal. Of significance, they indicated an understanding of the three elements needed for cultural healing and that the mural was a model for this. In the end, the use of art ended up being a powerful and non-threatening way to tackle this very difficult subject matter.

At JABSOM, we are honored to have a copy of the mural in a smaller version measuring 10 feet by three feet that has been used in our teaching curricula since 2016. The importance of this as a teaching tool continues to be confirmed in evaluations. We believe utilizing the mural in our curriculum also supports the Pou Kihi Framework for what is needed to promote health and wellness for our Native Hawaiian community. The mural represents our history and allows us to confront the pain and name it, but also charts a transformative path towards healing utilizing the strengths of our culture. By recognizing those cultural strengths of connection and caring for our ‘āina, remembering the teachings of our ancestors, utilizing that knowledge to achieve wellness, and advocating for social justice, we can achieve mauoli ola or optimal health through balancing mind, body, and spirit as well as our spirituality, connection to environment, and connection to each other (Kamaka et al. 2017, 54).

In summary, the ‘Āina Aloha mural remains an important tool for understanding and expressing the universal experience of pain while also demonstrating that there is always hope (the teal eddies), and that ‘on the other side,’ the path toward wellness lies in the balance of spirituality, connection to ancestors, land, culture, and the ability for all to be able to live in, dream for, and innovate towards a better future.

❧ **CONCLUSION** ❧ What has been discovered with the two-sided ‘Āina Aloha mural and shared now with the Hawaiian community as well as indigenous communities in New Zealand, Australia, and the Continental U.S., is that making the pain of the past visible and concrete has been a profoundly helpful way of seeing, naming, and beginning to deal with historical trauma in unforeseen, meaningful, and substantive ways.

These shared revelations are personal. They came from my own healing around this very conversation, because as a lifelong, practicing, visual artist and educator, I have

incorporated much of my own work into daily healing meditations and internal conversations about the past—trying to make sense of the devastation and tragedies of suicides and abuse, dysfunction, and destruction within my larger, extended ‘ohana (family). Amongst friends and acquaintances, the level of pain has been so profound, yet the ways forward for so many have been so complicated, encumbered by red tape or simply unavailable. Prisons worldwide are filled with native and indigenous peoples who have not had much opportunity or hope in expiating or delving into the real horrors and issues that have kept so many of us hurting and inflicting harm on ourselves and on one another.

The revelations that have come from the simple act of painting pain and horror onto canvas has reordered my universe—reordered the way I think of dealing with loss and pain. For so much of my own life, I have not been able to deal with the dark and negative aspects of Hawai‘i’s history, yet from this shared work with others, I have come to such deep understandings of shared pain and loss, through the simple, purposeful act of putting ideas and intentions and paint to canvas—through collaboration with beloved and trusted friends who are also artists and visionaries.

Through this process, I have discovered that in the mutuality and sharing of visual story, one’s ability to step completely into the work, is supported by the shared energy of others. The gratitude I have to ke Akua (God), nā kini akua mai ‘ō a ‘ō (the multitude of gods here and everywhere), to our ancestors who have guided the process, for the profound gifts, love and trust that I have received from those I’ve worked with is a testament to our best selves—to how we, as a people will be able to envision and work towards a future where we and our children’s children thrive for generations to come.

We will do more than survive. We will thrive. I have witnessed my own transformation and that of others throughout this process. It is deeply rich and resonant work that has completely changed me, for the better. It is has become clear that the key to much of collaborative work is to stay out of the way of the movement and energies of the collective—as the work itself is in motion. To be sure, in collaborative work, there is much reflection and conversation along the way, but not when everyone is in the channel and exchange of creative energies. Getting out of the way is a simplistic image, but one that is so remarkable to actually witness.

As a raconteur, a story-teller, my responsibility is to make clear the constant path (albeit circuitous) forward on my way to connecting a constellation of creative energies that have brought the work of 'Āina Aloha to fruition. What is offered through these images and stories is a clearer, more concrete understanding of what was inflicted upon native peoples and others in the past and an opportunity to initiate conversations that allow those willing, cognizant, and courageous enough, to begin dialogue with those very sets of peoples whose ancestors were perpetrators of those same horrors of the past. Ultimately, we desire healing energies to surface, to be recognized and shared by all in the community.

Through the completion of the 'Āina Aloha murals we have had the opportunity to manifest aspects not only of historical/cultural trauma, but of positive mo'olelo, by incorporating symbols and iconography of Indigenous and traditional values that tell vital parts of Hawaiian history, of our story. The devastating aspects of our story and spirit that have been visualized as trauma, stigma, demonization and erasure, the result of horrors created from the taking of our nation, silencing of our language, and denigration of the very spirit of who we are, are not what we are left with—rather it is what we envision together, through the healing practice of art and expression, that is our story. A story also depicted as a brilliant restorative narration complete with numerous aspects and best practices that remind us and others of who we really are—and what we are inherently capable of.

What compels me through the arts in all forms that I have worked in, is to bring truth and understanding and the desire to be of service to the larger narratives that our communities and other indigenous people the world over possess—intending for those generations that will come after us to have a better and more complete grasp of what came before. If there is to be a future, history—both the past and its aftermath—must finally be confronted, named, and dealt with. These human stories are shared—with the hope of each of us being courageous enough to step into open ended conversations with others who seek healing and mutual understanding.

My aim as an artist is to use this universal language of the visual arts to arrive at a much more inclusive narrative of our potential stories that our beloved communities can embrace as peoples across the globe. Our work and its message is much larger than any one artist; collectively it

presents the possibility of us as a society, actually making informed decisions about what kind of world we want to ultimately share in and live in as a species. Art can function in these practical, descriptive and deeply spiritual ways—as it can symbolically inspire unseen narratives that are yet to be created.

Resilience is a gift that was given by spirit which has allowed us to share this story here and now. 'Ike Hawai'i, Hawaiian knowledge and practices, are what the elders have safeguarded and handed down for us to use in these times. The peril of this age is real. The agency that we must affect and utilize as creatives comes from this very well-spring of traditional knowledge, language, and spirit. What is shared through 'Āina Aloha, allows for an opening, a path towards understanding a Hawaiian way of knowing that is potent, concrete, and viable for reconciliation and potential healing in these times. Our prayers and hopes for this work is that it offer larger audiences opportunities to engage productively with one another across divergent, ideological perspectives on both intimate, personal levels and more broadly in ways that can effectuate changes in attitudes and beliefs in the larger context of who we are—all one people. Mahalo, mahalo, mahalo.

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