

HE MO‘OLELO MAI NĀ KŪPUNA: ANCESTRAL LESSONS OF LIBERATION IN J. W. H. I. KIHE’S “KAAO HOONIUA PUUWAI NO KA-MIKI”¹

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This essay reads J. W. H. I. Kihe’s mo‘olelo “Kaa Hoouniua Puuwai no Ka-Miki” as a kīpuka of ancestral theorizing on Kanaka Maoli pilina—relationships shaped by ethics of consent, kuleana, and aloha. In a time of escalating settler colonial erasure and ideological restructuring, Kihe turned to mo‘olelo as a medium to safeguard Indigenous ways of relating and to offer instruction in intimacy, obligation, and interdependence. Drawing from the works of Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio and Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada on aikāne and mo‘olelo as theory, this essay demonstrates how Kihe’s work challenges Euro-American regimes of sexuality, temporality, and relation. Through a close reading of a key episode in “Ka-Miki,” I argue that mo‘olelo are not only literary artifacts, but sovereign sites of Indigenous political philosophy that reveal how Kānaka Maoli have long theorized intimacy beyond colonial categories. Revisiting these narrative ethics offers liberatory models for reimagining pilina in the present and future.

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HO‘OLAUNA (INTRODUCTION)

Kānaka Maoli continue to navigate relations shaped by settler colonial disruptions today—ranging from legal to spiritual and linguistic. Our relations have been recast through US law, heteronormativity, and western lenses of belonging and gender. Not only is our identity at stake, but also our capacity to care for one another and to raise up the futures our kūpuna imagined. Mo‘olelo, like J. W. H. I. Kihe’s, are not relics of the distant past but a blueprint of our futures.

Kānaka Maoli have always known that our survival depends on the quality of our pilina—our relations to one another, to the ‘āina, and to our akua. Our kūpuna left us instructions—sometimes blunt, often poetic—woven into mele, remembered in mo‘olelo, and encoded in the layered language of our ‘Ōiwi epistemologies. Today, however, amid the ongoing forces of settler colonialism, we are inundated with imported relational norms: the logics of monogamy, nuclear family, heteropatriarchy, and transactional care that seek to overwrite our own. As these settler ideologies crystallize into law, education, and everyday life, our kuleana is to return—not in nostalgia, but in political urgency—to the wisdom of our mo‘olelo and the intimate ethics they carry.

In this essay, I turn to “Kaa Hooniua Puuwai no Ka-Miki,” a mo‘olelo penned by Kona-born educator and writer J. W. H. I. Kihe in the early twentieth century. Writing during Hawai‘i’s brutal transition into territoriality, Kihe crafted mo‘olelo not as folklore, but as a political, intellectual, and deeply intimate intervention. As I will argue, “Ka-Miki” offers us more than a narrative: It is a theory of Kanaka Maoli intimacy that challenges settler logics of power and possession, and instead centers reciprocity, relational negotiation, and aloha as the grounding for shared life.

Drawing on the insights of Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio and Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada, whose works on aikāne and mo‘olelo opens new avenues for understanding Indigenous relationality, I engage Kihe’s text as a kīpuka—an intellectual refuge and generative ground. The mo‘olelo offers a multi-bodied pilina negotiated through ‘ōlelo kauoha, mutual consent, and ancestral ethics. By reading with Kihe, I contend that we not only recover suppressed histories of intimacy—we reawaken practices that can help us build more just, loving, and liberated futures.

KA MO'OLELO HAWAI'I, HE KĪPUKA NO KA PILINA (MO'OLELO HAWAI'I, A KĪPUKA FOR INTIMACIES)

Mo'olelo Hawai'i is the amalgamation of Hawai'i thought and philosophy, which serves as the lifeblood of Kānaka Maoli. While much critical scholarship on mo'olelo Hawai'i of the last forty years has focused on mapping our history, knowledge, and literary practices,² scholarship attending to how mo'olelo examines Kānaka Maoli gender and sexual relations is underrepresented. This is the intersection this essay will explore. Rather than reiterate how mo'olelo Hawai'i has been defined by Kānaka Maoli scholars, I aim to highlight how mo'olelo function as kīpuka for liberating our pilina—our intimacies with each other. In a world increasingly structured by settler logics of separation—where our pilina are fractured, surveilled, and constrained—mo'olelo Hawai'i function as refuges of refusal. They are kīpuka not only because they survive, but because they instruct. They remember for us the ethics of intimacy that this world conditions us to forget.

I find the kīpuka concept apt for conceptualizing the peaks and valleys of mo'olelo Hawai'i because, as a natural feature of our environment, kīpuka require those who engage with them to first consider one's obligations before entering. By obligations, I mean the material and non-material responsibilities each person carries, ranging from their accountability to their family, friends, and peers. Furthermore, as naturally occurring land features, kīpuka do not depend on regular engagement with Kānaka. Rather, they are self-sustaining ecosystems, fostering diverse and dynamic biological webs of life that have developed over time. To enter and engage with the literary kīpuka of mo'olelo is to recognize it as a site of living pilina. Possessing its own ecology of meaning, mo'olelo persist despite external changes and political upheavals, ensuring our knowledge is protected, living, and accessible for future generations.

Initially theorized by Davianna Pōmaika'i McGregor in her 2007 treatise *Nā Kua'āina: Living Hawaiian Culture*, the concept of kīpuka as a land feature that is able to, in McGregor's words, "resist and withstand destructive forces of change," has also been applied to the ways Kānaka have thrived in remote and protected areas of Hawai'i's communities—what she terms a cultural kīpuka (pp. 7–8). Expanded upon in 2018, Leon No'eau Peralto theorizes the kīpuka aloha 'āina to "include individuals and 'ohana who embody aloha 'āina and remain as noho papa,

in places that were not “bypassed by major historic forces of economic, political, and social change in Hawai‘i” (p. 2). I develop McGregor and Peralto’s conceptualizations further, arguing that mo‘olelo Hawai‘i should also be recognized as kīpuka, as culturally sustaining manifestations of Kanaka Maoli thought and philosophy that have withstood the test of time, US imperialism, and settler colonialism.

To conceptualize mo‘olelo Hawai‘i as a kīpuka is to also consider how we approach, tend, and feed the kīpuka. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, like how geographical kīpuka were shaped and reduced by western society needs, Hawai‘i narrative practices have undergone many transformations, forced to continually engage with western knowledge systems. In his treatise on Hawaiian translation, *The Mana of Translation: Translational Flow in Hawaiian History from the Baibala to the Mauna*, Kuwada (2024) elucidates how the territorial period of Hawai‘i became a golden era for extractive translation practices, shaping representations of Kānaka Maoli as the disappearing Hawaiian (p. 150). In the aftermath of this period, much of the scholarship from the late twentieth century through the twenty-first century has focused on preserving the integrity of our knowledge through a Kanaka Maoli lens. This shift has inevitably influenced how Kānaka Maoli engage with our knowledge and our mo‘olelo. To return to mo‘olelo as kīpuka—to meaningfully engage with and “feed” our mo‘olelo—is to recognize and critically examine the extractive and western ideologies that have been imported into our understandings of ourselves and our knowledge. Osorio (2021) similarly states:

Above all, exploring mo‘olelo requires recognizing and often shedding many imported Western assumptions about what literature is and isn’t. Specifically, mo‘olelo refuse to align themselves within a fiction and nonfiction binary. We must also embrace some further undeniable truths. Mo‘olelo is not folklore or legend. Mo‘olelo is not fantasy. Mo‘olelo is not always written down—an important point, because Western knowledges prioritize the written word. (pp. 14–15)

One such imported western ideology is monochronicity, the perception of time as a singular, linear progression. In contrast, mo'olelo Hawai'i is polychronic, meaning that it does not adhere to the strict confines of western literature and history. As Osorio (2021) contends:

Instead of being frozen in time and ink, mo'olelo move and shape-shift. Like our akua, mo'olelo have many kino. Within the context of occupation, when often only one truth, one version of history and justice can be allowed to survive, mo'olelo offers many truths and many versions, refusing to be reduced to a single authoritative fact or mana. Taking mo'olelo seriously allows for a more nuanced reading and understanding of history. By being many bodied as a genre, mo'olelo are inherently counterhegemonic, regardless of content, and consequently uniquely positioned to challenge white historiography and its occupying grip on Hawai'i. (p. 15)

One of the critical ways mo'olelo enriches our understanding of ourselves is through pilina. Similar to how kīpuka are imbued with mana by those who tend to them, each time a mo'olelo is told, expanded upon, innovated, or refashioned through haku mele or ha'i'olelo practices, it is imbued with greater mana. Attending to the intricate aesthetics of mo'olelo Hawai'i, Marie Alohalani Brown (2022) posits:

Like spiderwebs, mo'olelo and ka'ao are intricate creations, and how the spider creates its web can be read as an allegory for traditional 'Ōiwi narrative techniques. A spider weaves its web by releasing strands that it then carefully connects as it goes back and forth, up and down, and crosses here and there until the web is complete. And just as its method for constructing its web is informed by the countless spiders that existed before it, likewise mo'olelo and ka'ao reflect the countless generations of 'Ōiwi who have, collectively, contributed to the formation of a uniquely Hawaiian poetics, or literary aesthetic. (pp. 31–32)

As Brown asserts, like pūnāwelewele, or spider web, mo'olelo are unique creations that are representative of knowledge systems woven over a millenium. Along this vein—or thread—how our kūpuna related to one another, how they created and maintained pilina is among the knowledge systems that they wove into our mo'olelo. The countless examples of the varied relations our kūpuna have had—as kāne, wāhine, and māhū—offer us a doorway into the thought world of our ancestral intimacies and serve to inform the intimacies we can and should cultivate in the future.

What does this mean for us today? Engaging seriously with mo'olelo Hawai'i and the intentional knowledge systems our kūpuna interwove means embodying and enacting their lessons. It is one thing to read, understand, and intellectually comprehend our mo'olelo Hawai'i; it is another to practice their teachings of intimacy, reciprocity, and aloha in ways that hold meaning today. For me, this is where the true challenges lie. Our pilina are increasingly shaped by carceral, extractive, and individualistic logics that undermine collective care, erase 'Ōiwi ethics, and normalize settler violence in our homes and communities. To return to mo'olelo as kīpuka transcends nostalgia—it's urgent and necessary for the survival of our lāhui.

In the next section of this essay, I will focus on one pūnāwelewele spinner of sorts, Kona-born Kanaka Maoli writer J. W. H. I. Kihe, outlining his life and literary legacy. Establishing an understanding of Kihe is crucial to appreciating 1) his publications as kīpuka for our people and 2) the ancestral lessons he offers us.

J. W. H. I. KIHE—LIBERATORY PA'A MO'OLELO OF HAWAI'I

Born in Kona in 1854 and passing in 1930, John Whalley Hermosa Issac Kihe³ was a man of many talents: an educator, a prolific contributor to 'ōlelo Hawai'i newspapers, and a theorist of Hawaiian epistemologies and ontologies, which he explored through publishing his epic-length mo'olelo. Kihe's literary contributions as cultural production followed in the footsteps of many Kanaka Maoli writers before him and can be understood as a form of intellectual sovereignty. Initially theorized out of American Indian studies in the 1990s, the concept of intellectual sovereignty was emphasized by scholar Jack D. Forbes, who underscored the

necessity of an “intelligentsia” as a critical part to sovereignty. As Forbes (1998) asserted, “An intelligentsia cannot exist if the minds of the people are programmed to accept whatever colonialism decrees” (p. 14). Similarly, Noenoe K. Silva’s concept of mo’okū’auhau consciousness—a grounded form of Kanaka Maoli intellectual sovereignty—applies to the intellectual work Kihe practiced throughout his life as he wrote with a consciousness for the benefit of the future. To be committed to a consciousness of our mo’okū’auhau (genealogy), in Silva’s (2017) words, is to have “an unabashed commitment to Kanaka ontology and epistemology.” This means refusing to cede to empiricist and haole confines and constructs of our knowledge, existence, and practice (p. 10). As I will demonstrate in this section, Kihe’s life and intellectual contributions—particularly during the early decades of the twentieth century—demonstrate his commitment to mo’okū’auhau consciousness, establishing him as a foundational interlocutor of Hawaiian knowledge, and most importantly, of Kanaka Maoli relations and intimacies for us today.

A descendant of the renowned kahuna Hewahewa, Kihe was born to Samekona Pahoa Kihe and Kainoalau, with deep ancestral ties to the lands of Kohala and Kona ‘Ākau (North Kona). Kihe, the fifth of eight children, spent much of his youth with his grandfather, Kekuapahoa Konaaihele, whom Kihe credited for teaching him the au nui (big currents) and au iki (small currents) of Hawaiian knowledge. Throughout his adulthood, Kihe married three women: Kepola Kamakanaiea Hopulaau Kihe, Lahela Kihe, and Kaimu Nahinu. Following the spirit of “Ho’oulu Lāhui,” the Mō‘ī Kalākaua’s motto to grow the nation, Kihe fathered twelve children over the course of his relationships.

Kihe served the lāhui in many capacities throughout his life—as an assistant schoolteacher, community organizer, and most importantly, as an intellectual. In 1924, six years before his passing, Kihe published a serialized memoir, “Na Hoomanao o ka Manawa,” in *Ka Hoku o Hawaii*. His reflections capture turbulent and traumatic events of Hawaiian history, namely the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom and the transition into territorial rule, which eventually led to the widespread loss of Hawaiian lands.

One of the poignant themes in his memoir is the devastating impact of US imperialism on Hawaiian land tenure. He laments how Kona lands, once abundant with long-established families, had become increasingly empty. As Kihe contends:

O kekahi mau mea e hoomanao ia e pono ai e pōina ole ia e ka noonoo o ke kanaka e ola ana i keia la ame kela mau la aku la mai ka 1870 mai, no keia kowa o 53 makahiki a oi, oia no ka noho ana o na ohana ma keia mau apana o Kekaha mai na Honokohau, Kaloko, Kohanaiki, na Ooma, Kalaoa, Haleohiu, Makaula, Kau, Puukala-ohiki, Awalua, na Kaulana, Mahailua, Makalawena, Awakee, na Kukio, Kaupulehu, Kiholo, Keawaiki, Kapalaoa, Puuanahulu ame Puuwaawaa.

He mau aina piha kanaka keia ia mau la, na kane, na wahine a me na keiki piha na hale me na ohana nui a lau-kanaka maoli no... keia kekahi o na aina kanaka nui i keia wa, a ma muli o ka mahalehele ia ana e ke aupuni i mau apana Home Hookuonoono, a ma muli oia mau home i hoi mai ai ka mea e kakau nei a noho paa maanei a lilo i kupa no keia aina mauna e noho nei i keia mau kaiaulu. (Ka Ohu Haaheo, 1924, p. 3)

[Somethings that need to be remembered that should not be forgotten by those living today and those past days from 1870 onward, around 53 or more years, that is the families that have been living in these areas of Kekaha from the Honokohaus to Kaloko, Kohanaiki, the Oomas, Kalaoa, Haleohiu, Makaula, Kau, Puukala-ohiki, Awalua, the Kaulanas, Mahailua, Makalawena, Awakee, the Kukios, Kaupulehu, Kiholo, Keawaiki, Kapalaoa, Puuanahulu, and Puuwaawaa.

These lands were most populated in those days with large families of men, women, and children filling the homes.... these are some lands that are populated these days because of the government's land appropriations for some homesteading. This homesteading is the reason why your writer was able to return and live here securely and become a native to these mountainous lands of these communities.]⁴

Importantly, Kihe's reflections provide a doorway into the issues twentieth-century Kānaka Maoli contended with, while also highlighting how they utilized the 'ōlelo Hawai'i newspapers to document and memorialize the changes they lived through.

As Hawai'i transitioned into US territorial status, Kihe grew bolder in his intellectual pursuits, seeing himself as an arbiter of truth. Akin to Joseph Nāwahīokalani'ōpu'u's (1895) "ume mageneti" (p. 7) formulation, Kihe published his work as a guiding compass for his people, who, under mounting pressure of the 1896 'ōlelo Hawai'i ban and the territorial push for American assimilation, began to abandon 'ōlelo Hawai'i and 'ike Hawai'i. Two decades into the territorial era, Kihe joined the ranks of many writers who took to the 'ōlelo Hawai'i newspapers to reaffirm the value of 'ōlelo Hawai'i in contemporary life. However, Kihe (1920) took a bolder approach—in an editorial titled "Ka Olelo Hawaii," published in *Ka Nupepa Kuokoa*, he explicitly illustrated the consequences of abandoning our mother tongue by expressing his deep concern over Hawaiian organizations and churches shifting their meetings to English—a grave injustice in his eyes. As Kihe states:

I ke kukuluia ana o na ahahui o na Hawaii, he mea pololei maoli no ke lawelawe ia na hana pili i na ahahui o na Hawaii ma ka olelo Hawaii, ka olelo i kupono maoli no i na ahahui Hawaii ke lawelawe ma ka lakou olelo pono, aole hoi ma ka olelo namu Beritania e lawelaweia ai. (p. 2)

[When the various Hawaiian organization were created, the correct intent was for them to be conducted in Hawaiian, the language most appropriate for Hawaiian organizations in conducting their proceedings as it is their true language, not in the foreign English language.]

Because ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i was, in Kihe’s view, the lifeblood of his people, witnessing the leaders of Hawaiian and religious organizations openly abandon it—not only in theory, but in practice—was a threshold that should never have been crossed. To Kihe (1920), ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i was as follows:

...[ka] olelo kumu a keia lahui mai kona hookumuia ana mai,
a o ka olelo hoi mai ko kakou mau kupuna mai, a i lilo hoi
i kiahoomanao poina ole e haaheo ai ke kanaka Hawaii, ka
wahine Hawaii, ke kekikane Hawaii ame ke kaikamahine
Hawaii, no kana olelo makuahine i keia la a mau aku. (p. 2)

[...[the] original language of this nation from its inception,
and the language of our ancestors, which has become an
unforgettable foundation that each Hawaiian man, woman,
boy, and girl, can proudly stand for their mother tongue
today and in the future.]

One of Kihe’s points in this editorial that best represents his politics, his commitment to the survival of our people and our language, and in Silva’s words, his “unabashed commitment to Kanaka ontology and epistemology” is when he gives ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i a physical form—in the embodiment of a mother, a passage I will quote at length. Kihe (1920) states:

O ka hoao ana o ke kanaka Hawaii a i ole o ka wahine
Hawaii paha e kiola a i ole ia e haalele a hoowahawaha
i kana olelo makuahine, ka olelo hoi a kona lahui ponoī,
alaila, ua like ia me ke keiki aiwaiu e hoao ana e pepehi i
kona makuahine ponoī.

Ma ka olelo e ikeia ai kela ame keia lahui kanaka, oiai o kana
olelo, o ia iho la ka mole, ka i‘o, ka iwi ame ke koko i hanau
pu ia mai me ia maluna o kona aina makuahine, a he mea
nui loa ka olelo, ma ka moolelo o na lahui naauao apau o ke
ao nei, aohe lahui i hooneleia i kana olelo ponoī mai kona
hookumu ia ana mai.

O ka haalele ana o ke kanaka Hawaii ame ka wahine Hawaii i ke kamaile ana i kana olelo pono, a i olelo malihini kana e kamaile ai, a e lawelawe ai maloko o na ahahui, a ma na anaina hoomana paha, alaila, ua pepehi no oia iaia iho ame kana mau keiki pono, a ua hoowahawaha hoi i kona aina ame kona lahui i hoea mai ai. (p. 2)

[The Hawaiian man or woman perhaps attempting to cast aside or abandon and reject their Hawaiian language, the language of their own nation, is like an infant attempting to kill their own mother.

Each nation is identified by the language they speak because their language is the foundation, the body, the bones, and blood they are born with on their motherland. And language is critical in the histories of the enlightened nations of the world because there is no nation who has been stripped of their own language from their inception.

The Hawaiian man and woman abandoning their own language to speak a foreign language—perhaps in Hawaiian organizations or church meetings—is akin to suicide and killing their own children and likewise their land and nation from the beginning.]

Sixty-six years of age, Kihe felt a deep sense of accountability to both his ancestors and future generations of Kānaka Maoli to uphold the lifeblood of Hawai'i—'ōlelo Hawai'i. His aloha for Hawaiian progeny and their estrangement from 'ōlelo Hawai'i—the compass to navigating pilina with one another—echoed in his critical account of how youths of his time coped with societal pressures:

Ke ike ia nei no keia mau hiona ame na hana iwaena o na keiki ame na kaikamahine a kakou i keia mau la o ka naauao e nee nei me na hana kolohe o ka aihue, ka powa, ka piliwaiwai, ka hookamakama, ka hoopoino ina kaikamahine opio a me ka hoohaumia ina wahine a pela aku.” (Ka Ohu Haaheo, 1924, p. 3)

[We are seeing these characteristics and acts among our boys and girls these days, namely stealing, robbery, gambling, sexual lasciviousness, endangering young girls, and defiling and disrespecting women, and those sorts.]

Disproportionately affected by imported haole ideas of relation, Hawaiian youth of the time began to acculturate to those ideas, which had—and continue to have—a pervasive influence in Hawai‘i. Kihe would likely argue that this behavior was a direct result of abandoning our mother tongue—our mother—leaving children linguistically orphaned and deprived of the traditional values of morality and pilina embedded in ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i.

To be in Kihe’s position, witnessing many people—his peers, his children, and their children, his grandchildren and their grandchildren—succumb to the rising tide of US imperialistic ideologies of white supremacy and English exceptionalism would give anyone a reason to falter. Yet, like Pōhakuolēkia, Puna’s famed pōhaku ho’okalakupua (more-than-human rock), Kihe chose to ‘oni a pa’a, to strengthen his resolve.⁵ His intellectual work, embodied in the many mo’olelo he published, became his way to care and nourish his ‘ōlelo makuahine, his mother tongue and mother—reduced to a kīpuka of resources among a once-abundant landscape now rendered desolate like Kihe’s home at Kona ‘Ākau.

To conceptualize the breadth and depth of Kihe’s intellectual agenda, which he materialized through his mo’olelo, is to not only gain an expansive view of Hawai‘i’s history but to also recognize the many nuanced ways Kānaka Maoli have expressed our thoughts and philosophy through our engagements with mele, mo’olelo, and one another. Kihe’s intellectual philosophy was grounded in the vitality of his people, as he understood both the capabilities of the Hawaiian people and the rich legacy of knowledge we stand on, while also being cognizant of the traumatic circumstances Kānaka Maoli have endured. As such, Kihe often wrote about ho’omana Hawai‘i (Hawaiian spiritual practices), hula (ritual dance), mahi ‘ai (farming), lawai‘a (fishing), and most importantly malama (ethnoecologies).

Beginning in 1910, Kihe undertook the ambitious task of publishing “Kaao Hooniua Puuwai no Ka-Miki”—a serialized mo’olelo of extraordinary breadth that would eventually span over 800 place-based stories from across Hawai‘i island. But the path to full publication was anything but smooth. “Ka-Miki” was first serialized in *Ke Au Hou*, a Hawaiian language newspaper edited by John H. Wise, running

from May 1910 until the paper ceased operation in early 1912. It then migrated to *Hawaii Holomua* under Wise's continued editorship, but again, the newspaper shut down before completion. Kihe made a third attempt in *Ka Momi o Hawaii* in early 1913, yet publication was again interrupted.

For many, three failed attempts might have signaled an endpoint. But Kihe, like the protagonists of his own mo'olelo, refused to yield. On December 25, 1913, *Ka Hoku o Hawaii*—under editor Rev. S. L. Desha Sr.—announced the forthcoming republication of “Ka-Miki,” this time from the very beginning. The serialized story began in January 1914 and ran uninterrupted until December 1917, marking the mo'olelo's longest and most complete publication.

This publication history is not merely an archival curiosity—it is an index of Kihe's 'ōlelo kauoha to his lāhui. In the face of a rapidly transforming political and linguistic landscape—where 'ōlelo Hawai'i was increasingly excluded from schools, churches, and public discourse—Kihe did not retreat. Instead, he doubled down. The repeated republication of “Ka-Miki” across multiple editorial homes speaks to a conviction that this mo'olelo was more than entertainment; it was a vessel of knowledge, a reminder of ancestral ethics, and a tool for restoring relationality in a time of fracture.

By weaving mele and mo'okū'auhau into a vast literary complex, Kihe was not only preserving knowledge but activating it. His persistence models the very forms of relational accountability his mo'olelo promotes: steadfastness, reciprocity, and refusal to let go. In this sense, “Ka-Miki” is not just a story—it is a refusal of disappearance. It is Kihe's declaration that our relationships, our language, and our mo'olelo will continue to breathe, regardless of the institutions that try to silence them.

Kihe's persistence in publishing “Na Hoomanao o ka Manawa” and “Ka-Miki” tells us that he saw mo'olelo not only as literature, but as legacy. Its survival mattered because its contents mattered: His published mo'olelo encoded the very relational ethics, spiritual commitments, and political teachings that he believed could fortify his people against the eroding tides of Americanization. If the territorial government sought to reshape Hawaiian youth through foreign ideologies of discipline, morality, and relation, Kihe offered an alternatively Native thought world—one grounded in mo'okū'auhau, 'āina, and pilina. To take the mo'olelo seriously, then, is to embody the claim that our stories do not merely reflect our world; they shape how we live in it. In what follows, I turn to a key episode in

“Ka-Miki” that illustrates how Kihe constructs an ‘Ōiwi theory of intimacy—one centered on mutuality, consent, and kuleana—as a living, liberatory alternative to settler formations of love, sex, and relation.

“KIHE’S INTELLECTUAL AGENDA IN ‘KA-MIKI’”

Kihe’s intellectual agenda was both grounded and motivated by his rich upbringing in Kona as well as the politics and political forces that shaped Hawai‘i in his lifetime. To echo renowned Kenyan scholar Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (2005), who contends that African literature cannot be discussed meaningfully in an echo chamber devoid of its social construction (p. 4), I argue that to meaningfully understand Kihe’s intellectual work is to understand the politics of the territorial period that served to constrain, filter, and enshrine Hawaiians like Kihe as a version of the Hawaiian-American object. As I will demonstrate in the final section of my essay, Kihe’s mo’olelo “Kaa Hooniua Puuwai no Ka-Miki” serves to both (1) counter Euro-American discourses of the Hawaiian-American and (2) become a kīpuka for ancestral understandings of intimacy.

As Hawai‘i transitioned into a territory of the US, there were many juridical proceedings that took place to translate Hawai‘i into an object of the US. As Hawai‘i historian Derek Taira (2024) contends, the years 1901 to 1905 saw a slew of court opinions called the “doctrine of incorporation.” This doctrine clarified incorporated and unincorporated territories. In effect, in Taira’s words, “...this doctrine provided the theoretical scaffolding necessary for labeling such groups as inferior to European Americans thereby justifying US occupation and control” (p. 25). While it’s important to understand the variety of US imperialistic discourses that were being brought to Hawai‘i in this period, we should remember how Kānaka Maoli, like Kihe, contended with these discourses. As Noenoe K. Silva has thoroughly analyzed the ways Kānaka Maoli resisted American colonization in the nineteenth century,⁶ it is important to keep in mind that this continued into the first few decades of the early twentieth century as well.

As Hawai‘i was being incorporated into the body politic of the US, territorial government leaders likewise began to enact educational policies that would do the on-the-ground work of producing Kānaka Maoli as objects of the US empire.

For example, the *Hawaii Educational Review* (*HER*), a professional-development resource for Hawai'i territorial schoolteachers, began publication. As Taira (2024) reminds us:

The intention of this “official organ” of the DPI was to promote pedagogical proficiency and standardization with all teachers through a monthly periodical espousing the “best and latest” in educational thought, free of “propaganda” and political affiliations. In reality, schoolmen relied on the *HER* as an indispensable tool of “especial forcefulness” for relaying the “gospel” of Americanization. To make sure no teacher missed out, territorial officials regularly directed faculty to read each month’s issue. (pp. 47–48)

Between 1913 and 1940, the content within the pages of the *HER* echoed its foundational sentiment: Hawai'i was American (Taira, 2024, p. 50). To keep in mind Kihe's reflections from his memoir, the Hawaiian children of school age during these years were the same children he was worried about who had been affected by western ideologies that became pervasive in Hawai'i.

The content the *HER* published over its run proved to be particularly damaging ideologically for Kānaka Maoli. Territorial superintendent Will C. Crawford (1925–1934) underscored the importance of studying American historical figures' biographies as a means of “character training.” As Taira (2024) continues of Crawford:

He highlighted courage, honesty, vigor, sacrifice, humility, and optimism as key character traits he wanted Hawai'i's students to model. These inherent features of America's famous leaders formed a “criteria for judging great men” that Crawford extended to include heroes from Greek and English literature while ignoring equally great Indigenous examples of wisdom, courage, and determination exemplified by the exploits of various ali'i (chiefs) ('Umiāli'loa, Ka'ahumanu, and Kamehameha I) and cultural heroes (Maui and Pelehonuamea). Instead, Crawford offered Robin Hood, Hercules, William Tell,

and even “stories from Aesop and Brer Rabbit” as prime examples of the proper “philosophy of life” dedicated to self-sacrifice and perseverance, effectively marginalizing Native Hawaiian models. (pp. 51–52)

The territorial education project sought to overwrite Kanaka Maoli minds, desires, and relations—beginning with the classroom and extending into the home. Kihe’s “Ka-Miki” is not merely a counternarrative to this agenda; it is a refusal to cede relational sovereignty. It insists that Kanaka Maoli values of pilina, kuleana, and aloha remain vital intellectual tools for contesting the totalizing force of settler pedagogy.

“Kaa Hooniua Puuwai no Ka-Miki”

“Kaa Hooniua Puuwai no Ka-Miki” is a mo’olelo ka’ao—an innovative form of mo’olelo in which Kihe masterfully strung together over 800 place-based traditional narratives of Hawai’i Island to create an unprecedented story. While some have characterized ka’ao as “lacking the historicity of mo’olelo,” to borrow from Brown (2022, p. 28), it is important to recognize that as a Kanaka Maoli literary aesthetic, ka’ao are mo’olelo rooted in and based on other mo’olelo. Kihe’s ability to recall and intricately weave almost a thousand Hawai’i Island-rooted mo’olelo into a single ka’ao—as a literary spiderweb—demonstrates three relationships: (1) the genealogical ties between mo’olelo and ka’ao, (2) the intimacy between Kihe and the traditional practices through which mo’olelo and ka’ao are woven, and (3) the birthing of “Ka-Miki” as a prodigious progeny of those first two relationships. To discount ka’ao is to also minimize the literary aesthetics that have been passed down by our ancestors. As Brown (2022) reminds us, “ka’ao can be new takes on old topics, but they are rooted in tradition” (p. 31).

“Ka-Miki” centers around two protagonists, Kamiki and his older rat-brother, Maka’iole, the “eueu hiapairole” (lively experts) of Kona, as Kihe describes them. The crux of this four-year-long serialized story in *Ka Hoku o Hawaii*’s pages is a huaka’i ho’oponopono ‘āina (land-appropriating trek). By huaka’i ho’oponopono ‘āina, I mean that Kamiki and Maka’iole’s maternal kupuna wahine (grandmother), Kauluhenuihikoloiuka, recognized the growing greed and abuse among those in power across various districts of Hawai’i Island. Instead of caring for their people, these rulers exploited their authority—cheating, mistreating, and killing those in

their lands for personal gain. Kauluhenuihikoloiuka—a highly respected expert in lua (Hawaiian hand-to-hand combat), hula, and ho'omana Hawai'i—sought to correct this imbalance. She raised and rigorously trained Kamiki and Maka'iole in lua, ho'omana Hawai'i, and other sacred arts, preparing them for their huaka'i ho'oponopono 'āina. After completing their 'ūniki 'ailolo (rite-of-passage ceremony), the two embarked on their huaka'i, traveling from Kona to Ka'ū, Puna, Hilo, Hāmākua, Kohala, and back to Kona. Along the way, Kamiki and Maka'iole engage in ho'opāpā (intellectual riddling practices) with various 'ōlohe (expert of a practice) to fulfill their grandmother's kauoha (decree). The section of the story I will focus on follows Kamiki and Maka'iole's journey through Ka'ū.

After besting Kaumaea and Kamā'oa—ali'i (chiefs) of Ka'ū—in lele kawa lehu lepo (leaping contest into soft earth), Kamiki and Maka'iole were formally welcomed into the chiefs' court. Impressed by their opponents' skill, Kaumaea and Kamā'oa sought to form a pilina between their daughter, Wai'ōma'o, and the two victors. Wai'ōma'o was renowned throughout Ka'ū for her prowess in lele kawa lehu lepo, making her an ideal match. However, the pilina was contingent upon the "olelo paa" of Kaumaea, which would determine how the pilina could be solidified. Upon meeting Wai'ōma'o, Kamiki and Maka'iole were offered the finest that Ka'ū had to give—endless amounts of fish, an open home, finely-woven lau hala (pandanus) mats from Puna, and the best kalo (taro). Flattered by this generous welcome, Kamiki responds with deep appreciation and admiration for Wai'ōma'o. Kamiki says:

Nui ka mahalo ia oe e ke kaikamahine alii opio no ka nui
noeau o kau mau pua hala aala onaona i kui mai nei a lawa
na lei e kohu ai o ko aina a ka makani e unuunu ai a pii
ka e'a o ka lepo iluna, a oia ka mea i olelo ia ai ka makani
kuehu lepo o ka aina i ka Ipukai Pohina a ka makani, e
ulupa ana i ka ohuku ale a ke kai e holu mai la i Kamilo
Holu, i ka wiliau a huai koieie ke au a kaa-niiu eha ka pua
o ke Koaie. (Kihe, 1915a)

[I am grateful to you, chief, for your skillfully sewn hala lei with its fragrant hala flowers [hīnano] that are a perfect representation of your windy land that, when it blows, it kicks up the dirt and that’s what inspired Ka’ū’s saying about the circling Kuehulepo wind of the land that resembles a calabash, that stirs the billowing swells of the sea at Kamilo, the current where the koiai’e flower is caught and freed.]

As Wai’ōma’o hospitably offers the best of her ‘āina, Kamiki and Maka’iole reciprocate through their affections. Admiring the hīnano of the fragrant lei hala that Wai’ōma’o sewed herself and recalling the famous wind and sea of Ka’ū that made the lei hala possible, Kamiki and Maka’iole engage in a deep form of intimacy with Wai’ōma’o. In Kanaka perspectives, deep intimacy is expressed when one demonstrates knowledge of a loved one’s ‘āina, comparing their intimate to land features well-loved by that individual. Aloha, then, is expressed through the ‘āina itself, citing familiar features of an intimate’s land in order to demonstrate the intimacy shared between individuals. Importantly, Kaumaea, Kamā’oa, and Wai’ōma’o are all names of ‘āina in Ka’ū. For Kamiki and Maka’iole to engage with Wai’ōma’o’s aesthetics—both as the ali’i and as the ‘āina—is to recognize that the person is also the ‘āina. As Osorio (2021) reminds us, “Our kūpuna made Kānaka out of these places, to guard, protect, honor, and exalt our ‘āina. We also learn from examining these pilina between ‘āina and Kānaka that terms we might think of as identities are also intimate relationships” (p. 97).

Wai’ōma’o then meets with her father, Kaumaea, expressing her “koi” (desire) for Kamiki and Maka’iole. In response, Kaumaea issues his ‘ōlelo kauoha, decreeing that she will ho’opāpā with the two brothers to determine their collective compatibility as intimates. He declares:

A ina oe e eo ana i kēia mau keiki, ea; a laila, o kau mau kane ia e hoao ai e ku’u kaikamahine; a i eo ole oe, a laila, e hookuu aku no ia laua e hele me ka maluhia ma ka laua huakai, oiai, ua lohe mai nei au, he mau keiki olohelua keia ma ka hoopapa ma na mea apau, a oia ke kumu o ko laua hele e kaapuni nei apuni o Kahakaeaea a o Hawaii Kuauli nui a Kane. (Kihe, 1915b)

[And if you win, they are yours to engage with more deeply, my beloved daughter, but if they win, then you are to let them go freely on their journey because I've heard they are experts in ho'opāpā and all things and that's why they are traveling across Kahakaeaea, otherwise known as Hawaiikuauilui a Kane.]

Kaumaea's 'ōlelo kauoha is critical here in demonstrating the complexities of pilina because it determines the nature of the pilina Wai'ōma'o will share with Kamiki and Maka'iole. Uttered straight from the mouth of the ali'i, the 'ōlelo kauoha carries mana (power) and thus plays a role in socially constructing the Hawaiian world. In Wai'ōma'o's case, Kaumaea's 'ōlelo kauoha sets the parameters for how Kamiki and Maka'iole are to engage with her. The crucial point here is that Kaumaea, as both the ali'i and father, models an ethic of aloha and consent that is relational. Here, establishing the parameters of relation models a Native relational ethic that emphasizes the broader network of relations inclusive of the family unit as well as the tethered extended relations. This challenges settler modes of intimacy that privilege ownership and individualism.

So, what lesson does Kihe offer us concerning the 'ōlelo kauoha of pilina today? As seen in the example above, the parameters Kaumaea sets are based on fundamental values of respect, reciprocity, and aloha. Deeply rooted in one's relationship to their 'āina, 'ohana, and mo'okū'auhau, Kaumaea's 'ōlelo kauoha respectfully engages Kamiki and Maka'iole's obligations, as the ho'opāpā—the very reason for their huaka'i—becomes the lynchpin in determining which 'ōlelo kauoha holds more mana: their grandmother's or Kaumaea's. Generative and productive, envisioning our pilina today as similarly rooted in mutual respect challenges settler lenses of belonging that have been imposed on our relation-building practices. As we'll see shortly, the 'ōlelo kauoha for Kamiki, Maka'iole, and Wai'ōma'o is what binds their pilina in a deep aloha for each other.

As the mo'olelo goes, Kamiki and Maka'iole then best Wai'ōma'o in the lele kawa lehu lepo. For their victory, Kaumaea grants them access to all of Ka'ū's 'āina and mana, represented by a single individual, Wai'ōma'o, while still acknowledging his 'ōlelo kauoha to permit the brothers to leave should they best his daughter at lele kawa. Navigating these complex terms of the pilina, Kaumaea then requires the two brothers to adhere to an ethic of pilina with Wai'ōma'o as such:

A ma keia wahi e a'u mau keiki a hunona hoi, na olua e ike i na mea e pono ai ka noho ana o ka olua wahine, mai haalele lokoino olua iaia e naauauwa aku i ke aloha no olua mahope nei a kulolia loa ko olua alahele no mua, oiai, ke ike nei au i ka pipili ikaika o kona manao hoohihi no olua. (Kihe, 1915c)

[Here my children, it is your responsibility to provide for your partner. Do not vilely abandon her, leaving her to grieve over you two as you continue on your journey, for I know how deeply she cares for you both].

Fulfilling the 'ōlelo kauoha—thereby becoming part of Kaumaea and Wai'ōma'o's fabric—also means being in a relationship where all are equally committed to each other's well-being. Beyond the intimacy and care shared between Kamiki, Maka'iōle, and Wai'ōma'o, there is also an intimacy and care expressed by Kaumaea ensuring that they care for one another in a way that honors their pilina and traditional ways of relating. This instruction demonstrates the crucial role the makua (parent) plays in pilina governance: Where settler logic deems the involvement of a parent as intrusive, here, it is an act of care that is intentional and holds political weight. Ensuring equal commitment and reciprocity, Kaumaea's contribution can be observed in the potential repercussions of transgression: If both parties fail to maintain an ethical pilina with the other, this not only jeopardizes political access to Ka'ū's 'āina and mana but affects the larger ecology of pilina of the collective.

Another critical juncture in this moment is how the pilina is negotiated. Initially, as terms are established, Wai'ōma'o is apprehensive about allowing her new partners, Kamiki and Maka'iōle, to continue their journey and fulfill their grandmother's 'ōlelo kauoha because of Wai'ōma'o's ko'i'i—her deep yearning to be with them. However, she arrives at a solution: She creates her own 'ōlelo kauoha for Kamiki and Maka'iōle, thereby binding their kuleana to her. Wai'ōma'o's 'ōlelo kauoha decrees:

Ke hookuu aku nei au ia olua e hele me ka maikai, me kuu kauoha paa nae ia olua no ka malama ana i ka maluhia o ko olua kino na'u hookahi, a elike no hoi me ka olua olelo kauoha ia'u, pela no hoi au e malama ai i ka ipu hulu a ka aumakua me ka ae ole aku i kekahi eu e hookapeke i ke po'i a hui hou kakou. (Kihe, 1915d)

[I am releasing you two with my decree, however, that your bodies are solely devoted to me, and likewise I will commit to you and care for the gourd of the ancestors not allowing anyone to loosen its cover until we are all united.]

These intricate, multilayered forms of negotiation demonstrate how Kanaka Maoli intimacy extends far beyond the physical. While the physical aspect is significant, the nuance and textures of consent—mutually agreeing on terms that honor each individual, their families, and their commitments—is paramount in establishing pilina, which is constantly evolving.

The final step in negotiating their pilina is ultimately physical celebration. Once the 'ōlelo kauoha were agreed upon—Kaumaea's to Wai'ōma'o, Kamiki, and Maka'iole; Kaumaea's to only Kamiki and Maka'iole; and Wai'ōma'o's to Kamiki and Maka'iole—they physically celebrate through honi (physical embrace). Also, Wai'ōma'o directly expresses how she treasures her relationship with both Kamiki and Maka'iole. She states:

O ko olua mau ihu, ua noa ia i ka ohana ame na poe apau ke honi, aka, o ka i'a kapu a ke konohiki aina ua kapu ia na ke kiai loko, na ka haku nona ka maka-ha. (Kihe, 1915d)

[Your noses are free to be embraced by your family and others, however, the ahupua'a head's sacred fish is reserved solely for the fishpond steward, for the overseer to whom the sluice gate belongs.]

Wai'ōma'o then physically embraces both Kamiki and Maka'iole intensely and longingly. Importantly, her words employ a nuanced level of *kaona* (hidden meaning) in comparing the brothers' bodies to be the sacred fish she, as the *kia'i loko*, tends to and protects. Understanding this comparison requires understanding the ecological role of Hawaiian fishponds as a primary source of food and sustenance for entire communities. In this way, Wai'ōma'o conveys that Kamiki and Maka'iole are sources of sustenance for her, just as she, as the steward of the fishpond, nurtures them. This illustrates the complexity and functionality of *pilina* in the Kanaka universe: *Pilina* are ecosystems; each one defined by the contributions and relationships between all inhabitants. For Kānaka, a *pilina*, like a fishpond, requires constant stewarding by all parties involved in order to satisfy a need and sustain a community. In this case, the success of an ethical relationship between Wai'ōma'o and the two brothers may serve all of Hawai'i Island as a political alliance in addressing abusive leadership.

In this scene, Kihe encodes an alternative ethics of relation—one that centers consent, care, and *kuleana* over possession or dominance. In a time when settler ideologies were narrowing Kanaka Maoli intimacy into colonial binaries, this *mo'olelo* offered—and still offers—a textured model for how we might relate otherwise. It is a reminder that our *kūpuna* left us instructions for how to care for each other in ways settler law cannot hold. Kihe's nuanced lesson of the importance of remembering our commitments to one another as well as the multilayered forms of respect, reciprocity, and *aloha* are paramount. In a time where values, ecologies of relation, and systems of belonging were being rewritten with settler sexuality, heteropatriarchy, and violence, Kihe, in a way, was speaking back. Osorio (2021) contends that writing these kinds of *haole* ideologies into our *mo'olelo* is to “obscure, or even unravel, the complex ‘upena of relations that actually organized our society, thereby furthering the ongoing agenda of settler colonialism by erasing alternatives to the twenty-first century household and civilization” (p. 74). This was Kihe's *leo ho'olale* (encouragement) and 'ōlelo *kaouha* to his readers—to us. He was trying to keep the 'upena of relations intact through his *mo'olelo*. As we saw in his memoir, he deeply cared about the generations following. In one way or another, the seeds he planted in “Ka-Miki” served to inspire the following generations to return to their roots and maintain their commitments to their 'āina, 'ohana, and themselves.

PANINA (CONCLUSION)

To close this essay, I will contextualize Kihe's 'ōlelo kauoha specifically: what it means to come from the mouth, or pen, of a Kanaka Maoli who contended with and survived the sweeping changes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hawai'i. As I have sought to demonstrate, understanding Kihe's tenacious intellectual agenda demands taking seriously the waves of change he both inherited and endured. Standing on the shoulders of Kānaka Maoli that preceded him, Kihe steadfastly advocated for the thoughts and philosophies of his kūpuna, despite the aggressive US imperialistic project of Americanization in Hawai'i. Kihe could have given up, but instead, he believed wholeheartedly in a future where his people would thrive once more. The future Kihe fought for is the present we now inhabit, and his intellectual legacy continues to shape the future we are forecasting today.

In an increasingly polarizing present—where western ideological discourses of division continue to pervade Hawai'i, much like in Kihe's own time—he reminds us of our commitments to one another—our kuleana—through his 'ōlelo kauoha. As seen through the pilina between Kamiki, Maka'iole, and Wai'ōma'o, 'ōlelo kauoha—embodied physical, emotional, and spiritual commitments—formed the foundation that allowed them to enact a pilina of mutual respect, aloha, and consent. These intricacies of Kanaka Maoli pilina demonstrate that pilina are constantly negotiated, possessing a structural tension that is continually refigured to align with the needs of those involved. The critical question, then, becomes the following: How do we embody the ancestral lessons from kūpuna, like Kihe, today?

Returning seriously to the thought world of kūpuna is not merely theoretical. Embodying the ancestral lessons Kihe wove into his mo'olelo means recognizing our pilina as interconnected strands of the same thread—one that is founded on 1) aloha for one another and 2) kuleana to those that have come before us and those that will come after. Kanaka Maoli intimacy is knowing one's place within that complex network, acknowledging your connections to others, and understanding that our actions do not affect just ourselves as individuals but the collective whole. Kihe understood what too many of us are still remembering: that our survival as a people has always depended on how we relate. His mo'olelo is a call—not only to reclaim the past, but to live again as if our pilina are sacred, fragile, and worth fighting for. If we heed his 'ōlelo kauoha, we will find the instructions for a liberated future already waiting within us.

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2 See Silva (2004, 2017) and ho‘omanawanui (2014).

3 I will subsequently refer to Kihe from here on out as Kihe.

4 English translations of Kihe’s work in this essay provided by me.

5 Pōhakuolēkia is a famed stone, which Pele brought to Hawai‘i from Kahiki. Known for steadfastly rooting himself in place when Kalaikini attempted to uproot him, Pōhakuolēkia is referenced as an example of steadfastness.

6 See Silva (2004).