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The Healer Stones of Kapaemahu by Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu, Dean Hamer, Joe Wilson, and Daniel Sousa, and: *Kapaemahu* by Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu, Dean Hamer, Joe Wilson, and Daniel Sousa, and: *The Healer Stones of Kapaemahu* (review)

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The Healer Stones of Kapaemahu.

Documentary film, 56 minutes, 2022. Directed and produced by Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu, Dean Hamer, and Joe Wilson; with animation by Daniel Sousa. Produced by Kanaka Pakipika in association with Pacific Islanders in Communication. Available at <https://kapaemahu.com/films/>.

Kapaemahu, by Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu, Dean Hamer, and Joe Wilson; illustrated by Daniel Sousa. Honolulu: Kokila, 2022. ISBN-10: 0593530063; ISBN-13: 978-0593530061; 40 pages, illustrations. Hardcover, US\$15.99; e-book, US\$8.99.

The Healer Stones of Kapaemahu.

Exhibition, Bishop Museum, Castle Memorial Building, Honolulu, Hawai'i, 18 June 2022–16 October 2022.

“Māhū” is a Hawaiian-language term used to describe gender-fluid individuals now considered to be queer, intersex, or transgender. In ancient Hawaiian culture and society, māhū individuals held spiritual import in their respective communities and families as healers and were by no means alienated. Nonetheless, the deleterious impact of colonialism and the imposition of a gender binary on Hawaiian society led to specific forms of discrimination, marginalization, and religious persecution of māhū people.

Today, māhū are reclaiming culture, history, and spiritual consciousness. While colonialism has at times made life difficult and unbearable for us, it has also brought forth expressive tools with which to adapt and share

Hawaiian mo'olelo (stories). Here I review three such tools—a documentary film, a children's book, and a museum exhibition, all referenced on the Kapaemahu website—to demonstrate how an ancient Hawaiian story about four gender-fluid māhū healers uplifts the voices of gender and sexual minorities in contemporary Hawai'i.

The Healer Stones of Kapaemahu, a documentary film, is divided into three distinct sections: first, an animated short film entitled *Kapaemahu*; next, an overview of the historical context behind the making of *Kapaemahu*; and finally, a reflection on how the story of Kapaemahu and Indigenous conceptions of gender and sexuality that have endured since precolonial times continue to inform Hawaiian movements for ea (breath, life, sovereignty) and LGBTQ justice in contemporary Hawai'i. The entire documentary is dubbed in the Ni'ihau dialect of the Hawaiian language, which is the only dialect of the Hawaiian language that remains spoken in everyday life as it was when Captain Cook landed in Hawai'i. Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu, a formidable Native Hawaiian māhū activist, educator, and linguist, is fluent in the Ni'ihau dialect and is the film's central narrator. Her voice lends depth and a genuine connection to the story.

In the animated short film *Kapaemahu*, māhū are portrayed as gender-fluid healers whose embrace of life defies the colonial imposition of the male/female binary. In vivid detail, Wong-Kalu describes the specific gifts of each healer. Kapuni healed through breathing, Kinohi psychically ascertained internal maladies, Kahaloa envisioned healing from afar, and

Kapaemahu healed with the power of touch. So revered were these mähū that each was honored with a large stone weighing thousands of pounds. Moving each carefully carved stone from its mountain in Kaimūkī to Waikīkī over three miles away—without the assistance of modern machinery—required hundreds of people and labor hours. Today, the stones remain in Ulukou, Waikīkī, and are a protected wahi pana (sacred site) cared for by local nonprofit organizations and volunteers.

The second part of the film documents the history of the Kapaemahu story. The four mähū healers are said to be legends from the island of Raiatea in the archipelago of Tahiti, where, according to Tahitian scholar Jean Yves, who is featured in the film, they were well known. Indeed, four mountain peaks near the sacred temple grounds of Taputapuātea are named in their honor. In Hawai‘i, the legend of these healers is similarly demarcated by sacred stone features. Like the stones, however, the sacred queer and fluid expression of the healers has been dismissed. As the film explains, such dismissal, while seemingly innocuous, is a political strategy of colonialism that denies queer indigeneity. Though Hawaiians have always had a carved-out role for sexual minorities in the family, such aspects of our identity have not been considered particularly important to acknowledge under Western influence. This is in part why the plaque installed at the Kapaemahu site in the 1990s omits any mention of mähū features that are queer. In October of 2023, efforts to remedy this exclusion led to a struggle for a new plaque at

the site, one that tells a variation of the story explicitly elevating Hawaiian understandings of queer sexuality, human harmony, and well-being.

The legend of Kapaemahu offers valuable lessons not just for mähū individuals but for anyone striving to protect empowering histories of marginalized communities. The documentary underscores the enduring impact of colonial impositions on sexual minorities in modern Hawai‘i. In the film, Brandy Lee, a renowned drag performer of mähū experience, reflects on the challenges she and other mähū performers at the Glades Nightclub—a popular local drag bar that closed in 1983—faced in the 1960s. They endured verbal and physical harassment, with the term “mähū” used as a derogatory slur rather than embraced as a culturally significant part of Hawaiian identity. This historical erasure resulted from colonization and forced mähū individuals to wear a button that read “I am a Boy” in an attempt to protect them. Paradoxically, these buttons increased the risk of violence and harm to mähū individuals. Lee’s segment in the film prompts essential questions: What if mähū history had been shared and valued in the 1960s, as it was in pre-colonial times? Would mähū individuals today be treated more equitably if their history were included in school curricula?

The documentary honors mähū legends and Hawaiian history, but the most compelling aspect centers on Indigenous LGBTQ liberation and justice for all people. The film highlights the importance of mähū identities, the impact of colonization on these identities, and the need to honor and

preserve traditions and customs that include how people really are and how people have always been. Notions of gender and sexuality evolve. Cisgender men and women, like transgender people, express their gender in a variety of ways. Rigid social constructs derived from Western cultures adversely limits fluidity for everyone. Indigenous frameworks positively improve access by creating harmonious rather than merely conflictive epistemologies. In the late 1990s, Wong-Kalu began to teach us about this harmony by historicizing mähū as healers and not as freaks. Since then, her leadership has been critical to empowering ancestral Hawaiian wisdom. Thus, to remember our mähū healers is not just about uplifting the erased legacy of mähū people but also about fostering the idea that a more accepting cultural framework potentiates liberation for everybody, including cisgender and transgender people, be they Hawaiian or non-Hawaiian, be they binary or not.

As the questions from Lee's scene remind us, education is key to building a better world, and children's books help to teach acceptance and tolerance. In this spirit, the book *Kapaemahu*, based on the animated short film, provides an accompanying curriculum for younger generations. The story centers on the four healers' positive impact on community and culture. Through engaging storytelling and vibrant illustrations, *Kapaemahu* introduces children to the Indigenous people's history of Hawai'i. From the importance of sacred sites to the significance of healing practices, the book provides a glimpse into under-theorized aspects of Hawaiian and

Pacific heritage. One of the central themes of *Kapaemahu* is aloha (love) and the ability to heal with and from aloha. Aloha is reciprocal, and we see this depicted in the tender relationship between the mähū healers and the communities they served.

Another significant theme in the children's book is communal affirmation of gender fluidity. Mähū are depicted as individuals who transcend binary gender roles, challenging Western norms. This representation is healthy because it allows children to interface with and appreciate gender diversity, promoting a more inclusive and accepting understanding of oneself in relation to others. In Hawaiian and Polynesian society, respect for dualism involves understanding that everyone has both feminine and masculine traits and that it is okay to be who you really are. *Kapaemahu* goes beyond being a captivating storybook and serves as an educational tool for Hawaiian culture, history, and values. For example, it includes a glossary of Hawaiian words, providing an opportunity for children to expand their vocabulary and gain a deeper understanding of the language. Additionally, the book's illustrations depict Hawaiian landscapes, traditional clothing, and cultural practices, offering a visual feast for young readers.

Since its release, *Kapaemahu* has received widespread acclaim for its powerful storytelling and stunning illustrations. It has been praised for its ability to engage children in conversations about cultural diversity, acceptance, and gender identity, and educators and parents alike have found it to be an invaluable resource for teaching children about empathy.

Like the animated short film, the book encourages people of all ages to embrace others while celebrating the uniqueness of every individual.

Bringing together the themes and content of the film and children's book, the Kapaemahu exhibition took place at the Bishop Museum from 18 June to 16 October 2022 and featured captivating banners, beautiful and classic photos, art, thoughtful panel discussions, and engaging performances. The exhibition began with a luau-esque extravaganza entitled "Māhū Madness" on the museum's great lawn. As attendees entered, we were serenaded by māhū entertainers, including musicians like Lina girl and Gobbles, known for their Hawaiian falsetto singing, and guided toward a large open field. Cocoa Chandelier, one of Hawai'i's premier māhū drag superstars, shared jokes and created a hilarious and warm atmosphere. For \$20, attendees could purchase a plate of Hawaiian food that included rice, laulau (steamed pork in taro leaves), and lomi salmon (a salmon pico de gallo). As people ate and gathered with friends and family, a beautiful, vivid rainbow hovered above as a light drizzle of rain gently blanketed the sunset sky, an auspicious and magical portent that descended on the festive feel of opening night. Māhū from around the world came to celebrate this joyous occasion.

At the Castle Memorial Building entrance, a large banner with the exhibition title and a still image from the short film of the four healers greeted visitors. Similar banners were placed throughout the Bishop Museum campus, and this, along with the stage lighting, the large projection screen

for the films, and the lively nature of the various planned events, gave a typically dry museum some added charm and spunk. Inside, Hawaiian artifacts such as traditional stone tools and kapa (traditional bark cloth) provided a cultural vibe. A replica of the healing stones placed nearby allowed visitors to appreciate the specificity of māhū Hawaiian heritage. The placement of these artifacts and the stone replica offered a logical way to begin the exhibition tour. It brought to life the chronology of Kapaemahu as an oral tradition passed down from generation to generation to a modern-day movement, setting a foundation for cultural sharing.

Through interactive displays and multimedia presentations, visitors immersed themselves in the history surrounding the Kapaemahu stones. The exhibition included photos and audiovisual loops of Hawaiian royalty from the 1800s, detailed information regarding the stones in the early 1900s, photos and videos of drag queen performers at the Glades Nightclub in the 1960s–1970s, and others, as well as a cave-like astronomical structure in which mana māhū activists like Maddalynn Sesepasara, a well-respected transgender leader, shared their experiences with the Mauna Kea movement.

The Kapaemahu exhibition also served as a platform for cultural education and monthly panel discussions. Panel discussions ranged from religion to elder care, fostering understanding of and appreciation for the unique challenges and triumphs of the māhū and larger LGBTQ community in Hawai'i. Through this immersive experience, the exhibition encouraged

advocacy beyond the museum. Perhaps one of the most memorable events was the closing ceremony, during which mähū drag kūpuna (elder) legends like Linda Brown and Brandy Lee performed live on stage in front of a packed audience.

The exhibition was a testament to the enduring cultural heritage of Hawai‘i. By providing historical context, sharing the stories behind the stones, and promoting intercultural and intergenerational exchanges in varying degrees and forms, it offered visitors a profound and immersive experience. It served as a reminder of the rich traditions and values that have shaped Indigenous Hawaiian culture and people, ensuring that the Indigenous cultural legacy continues to thrive for generations to come. Over its five-month tenure, *The Healer Stones of Kapaemahu* welcomed hundreds of people from near and far to enjoy an enduring affirmation of the healing mana (spiritual power) of the mähū community and to embrace and celebrate the vibrant tapestry of support that allows mähū to live and thrive inside and outside of Hawai‘i. Truly a success, the exhibition and its impact continue to inspire creativity through a variety of community discussions and projects.

In this review, I have covered three expressive cultural forms—a documentary film, a children’s book, and a museum exhibition—to demonstrate how an ancient Hawaiian story about four gender-fluid mähū healers created change for gender and sexual minorities in contemporary Hawai‘i. Yet I have barely scratched the surface of all the ways in which mähū life has been transformed by the power of

Kapaemahu and mähū healers of ancient Hawai‘i. As I write this, the Hawai‘i LGBT Legacy Foundation is gearing up for a monumental 2023 Honolulu Pride that welcomes home Sasha Colby as grand marshal following her crowning as Ru Paul’s first Native Hawaiian drag superstar earlier in the year, and honoring Kapaemahu with a ceremony at the wahi pana remains a priority for the organization. There is a famous saying in the popular Hawaiian song “Kaulana Na Pua,” written in 1893 by Eleanor Kekoahiwai Kalani Wright Prendergast in opposition to US annexation of the Hawaiian Kingdom, that speaks of being satisfied with the stones—that is, love of land and people—over the delusions of greed and money. For mähū, it is this deep love, these astonishing stones of the land, and the unwavering magic within them and within all mähū that continues to create a ripple effect across time and space, re-storying history and creating change for the betterment of all humankind.

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The Healer and the Psychiatrist. Documentary, 74 minutes, color, 2019. Filmed, directed, and produced by Mike Poltorak. In Tongan and English, with English subtitles. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources. See <https://www.der.org/> for prices and availability.

The Healer and the Psychiatrist is a carefully crafted and visually stunning