

Wandering the World's Most Isolated Metropolis: Structured Dispossession & Post-Apocalyptic Stress Syndrome in the Film *Waikiki*



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Introduction

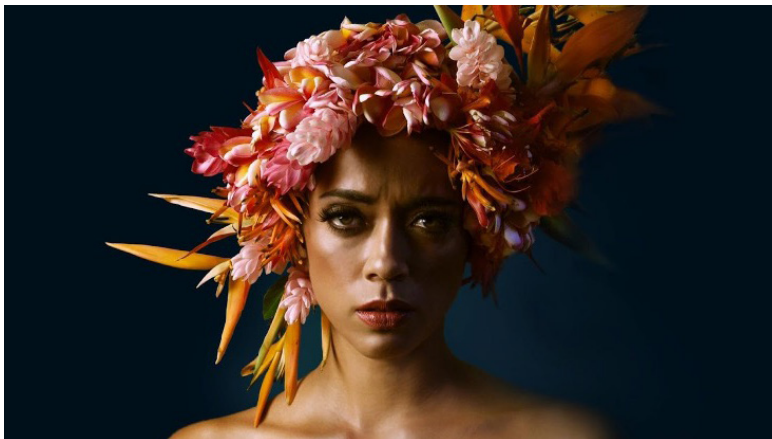
Waikiki, by Christopher Kahunahana, is a kaleidoscopic, speculative vision of surrealist and experimental filmmaking that deconstructs the colonial imaginary of Hawai'i as a tourism-based "paradise." The film unearths the sickness colonialism brings upon Indigenous peoples through homelessness, mental illness, domestic abuse, overdevelopment, and the loss of Hawaiian identity. Kahunahana's cinematic vision elucidates navigating the metropolis that is Honolulu and its dark underbelly of inflated houseless populations. These populations are disproportionately Native Hawaiian and most live in tent cities throughout the island of O'ahu, a painful truth that doesn't fit into the tourism industry's narratives of Hawai'i. *Waikiki* is centered around the main character Kea. Her plight operates as a stand-in for the hard realities of many Native Hawaiians who are homeless within their own homeland. Kea, played by actress Danielle Zalopany, is a young Kanaka Maoli woman who supports herself through hula dancing in Waikiki, being a bar hostess in Chinatown, and serving as a Native Hawaiian cultural teacher to children. By following the life of Kea, Kahunahana's film embodies "Post-Apocalyptic Stress Syndrome" (PASS) of Native peoples who, through the advent of colonialism, experienced the end of their worlds (Gross). *Waikiki* conveys these issues by stretching boundaries of time and space to embody a Native Slipstream that comments on the dystopian elements of living in Hawai'i after the apocalypse has already happened for Native peoples. As Grace L. Dillon (Anishinaabe) has stated, the Native Apocalypse has already happened (Dillon 8). Therefore, Gross's theory on Post-Apocalyptic Stress Syndrome is vital to showcasing beyond a "thought-experiment" format of speculative storytelling and instead illuminates lived realities. PASS can be identified in multiple levels of loss and cultivates intergenerational trauma through the severance of land or 'ike 'āina [to know the land]. Therefore, this cultural trauma of surviving the apocalypse is implicated throughout Kea's life of struggle and survival. Through a visual reading of *Waikiki*, I engage Glen Coulthard's "structured dispossession" and its capitalistic endeavors and emphasize the importance of reigniting connection to Kānaka Maoli epistemologies.

The film begins by following Kea through her different jobs she has to survive living in Honolulu. An altercation with her abusive boyfriend outside of a bar after work causes Kea to escape in the van she lives in until she runs over a homeless man named Wo. Kea takes Wo, played by Peter Shinkoda, into her life and thus the film takes a turn wherein past, present, future, and fantasy begin to blend together. Although it is commonplace for folks who live in Hawai'i to

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survive by working multiple jobs, Kahunahana's choice to have Kea work in the tourism industry and in sex work, interspersed with her connection to teaching Native Hawaiian language and culture, illuminates the complexities and messy entanglements of the lived realities and challenges contemporary Native Hawaiians face. By surviving the apocalypse and having connection to land severed, Indigenous peoples endure systems of violent dispossession that “ensur[e] that Indigenous land and resource bases remain open for exploitation and capitalist development [and futures]” (Coulthard 77). Surviving the Native Apocalypse means living within structural systems of extractive frameworks. The film, aptly named *Waikiki*, beckons to the militourism leviathan of cultural commodification that happens to Native Hawaiian culture. As formative Kanaka Maoli scholar Haunani-Kay Trask, who has extensively written about cultural exploitation, states, “The attraction of Hawai'i is stimulated by slick Hollywood movies, saccharine Andy Williams music, and the constant psychological deprivations of maniacal American life” (Trask, *From a Native* 137). Hawai'i represents a form of desirable escapism ripe for touristic consumption.

Film therefore becomes the medium and message to relay Kahunahana's sentiment that “Hawai'i is much more than Hollywood's backdrop” and to chronicle a story of failure within a colonial matrix as well as cultural survival (Sanders). The saccharine, slick Hollywood vision that is commonly accepted of Waikiki and the overall image of Hawai'i Nei to visitors is powerfully refused in Kahunahana's story.¹ The film portrays a gritty realness to aspects of Hawai'i that the tourism industry actively attempts to conceal in order to sell the idea of Hawai'i to the rest of the world. The accepted spelling in 'Ōlelo Hawai'i (the Hawaiian language) is actually Waikīkī, however, Kahunahana has stated that he chose to name the film after the touristic version (without diacritical marks) to highlight the commercialized aspects of Kānaka culture that have proliferated throughout Hawai'i's history. Surprisingly, most of the film does not actually take place in Waikiki. Though Kea's journey throughout the film begins there, the majority of it takes place in Chinatown, the Sand Island industrial area, and the metropolitan outskirts of Waikiki—all considered the extra 'dirty' areas of O'ahu for its high influxes of tourists and houseless populations.



Promotional Shot for Waikiki. Kea wears a haku and visually confronts viewers with a traditional form of cultural expression and a dead-locked stare.

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Promotional Shot for *Waikiki*. The two main characters, Kea and Wo, in front of a fake illusion of the “paradise” image of Hawai‘i.

Waikiki reignites the need for rebuilding and maintaining ‘Auwai [caring and tending for the ‘āina or land and ecologies of kalo] through the praxis explained by Noelani Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua. She states, “We need all the resources of our pasts and innovative capacities of our peoples to help us shape those transitions in ways that can bring us into preferred, non-imperial futures” (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua 246). In referencing cultivating ‘auwai or developing sustainable wetland cultivation, Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua is utilizing a metaphor for restoring pathways of cultural knowledge transmission (particularly in educational systems) against continued imperialism by rehabilitating economic and ecological systems that “will again allow us to feed ourselves and our ‘āina.” This dire need for reconnection to land is set up early in *Waikiki* and repeated with the phrase “*He ali‘i ka ‘āina, he kauwa ke kanaka*.” In one of the most powerful scenes that haunts the rest of the film, Kea arrives to work late after experiencing domestic violence from her boyfriend and having to show up to teach with Wo alive but injured in her van. Kea, a fluent speaker of ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i, discusses with her elementary students the literal translation of the phrase to mean “The land is the chief and the people are the servants.” Sonically, the scene differentiates itself as it happens completely in the Hawaiian language. Kea then instructs her students that the kaona or deeper meaning behind “*He ali‘i ka ‘āina, he kauwa ke kanaka*” is actually “We all must care for the land. Because in turn it will take care of us.” While the film takes place in the densely populated metropolitan areas of Honolulu, echoes of ‘āina (land) are cut and interspersed as images of Hawai‘i’s lush landscapes, bountiful rivers, waterfalls, and forests. These intersperses call on the viewer to recognize this ancestral truth of Hawai‘i that Kea, who is mentally, physically, and spiritually lost a majority of the time within the metropolis that is Honolulu, conveys to her *haumana* (students).

The importance of connection to land within the film is part of a larger genealogy of Hawaiian cultural beliefs and worldviews. Many Kānaka feminist scholars have called upon this genealogical connection to land to highlight a praxis of *Aloha ‘Āina* or love of land. As Haunani-Kay Trask has stated, “Our survival depends, especially today, on understanding and connecting to this land of our ancestors... Aloha ‘Āina means in economic terms agriculture and aquaculture—not hotels and not military bases... [it means] a profound cultural belonging to the land as our ohana, or elder brother, elder sister, those who went before...” (Trask, “69”). Therefore, the viewing audience of

Waikiki is confronted with the hyper-overdevelopment of Honolulu and as “*He ali‘i ka ‘āina, he kauwa ke kanaka*” reminds us: we must, as a people who have survived the apocalypse, rebuild our worlds and sacred connections. Grace L. Dillon has noted of the Native Apocalypse that telling our stories is a “returning to ourselves” and a recovering of our ancestral traditions in order to adapt to a post-Native Apocalypse world (Dillon 10). *Waikiki*, through its interspersed edits/cuts of the realities of living in Hawai‘i, highlights these truths through Kea’s plight of cultural loss and survivance centuries after Native Hawaiians experienced the apocalypse.

Surviving the Apocalypse

“Post-Apocalyptic Stress Syndrome,” a term created by Lawrence Gross (Minnesota Chippewa), indicates how American Indians have experienced the end of their respective worlds and also survived the apocalypse. His work is incredibly important to highlight how the effects of surviving imposed cultural destruction lingers and results in personal trauma and social dysfunction that can be combated by the rebuilding of American Indian communities that recognize conditions of both the past and the present. While describing the structured collapse of Native American livelihood and sovereignty and the need for cultural world-building, utilizing a trans-Indigenous approach with Gross’s work is necessary to begin to understand the destruction of Kānaka Maoli worlds that occurred. While the sheer depth of “unabridged sovereignty” that existed in precontact Native cultures and subsequent destruction of our ancestors’ worlds is hard to fully grasp, Haunani-Kay Trask describes the decimation of Hawaiian culture as such:

Like most Native peoples, Hawaiians lived in our mother's keeping until the fateful coming of the haole [or] Western Foreigners in 1778. Then our world collapsed from the violence of contact disease, mass death, and land dispossession; evangelical Christianity; plantation capitalism; cultural destruction, including language banning; and finally, American military invasion in 1893, and forced annexation in 1898. During the course of little more than a century, the haole onslaught had taken from us 95% of our Hawaiian people, 99% of our lands and waters, and the entirety of our political sovereignty. As the 20th century dawned, we were but a remnant of the great and ancient people we had once been. (“The Color” 11)

Thankfully, due to the foundational works of many Kānaka scholars and activists like Haunani-Kay Trask, a Hawaiian Cultural Renaissance has flourished since the 1970s. Further, in the present time, the Native Hawaiian population is over 500,000 in Hawai‘i and across the Hawaiian diaspora. There is a rebuilding of worlds occurring every day, all the time, and in different contexts. However, living in the post-apocalypse causes tremendous stress institutionally and personally upon Indigenous communities that can result in pervading intergenerational trauma. These stressors can manifest this trauma in ways succinctly described in Gross's research:

On the personal level,

1. An abandonment of productive employment

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2. An increase in substance abuse
3. An increase in violence, especially domestic violence
4. An increase in the suicide rate
5. An increase in the rate of mental illness
6. The abandonment of established religious practices
7. The adoption of fanatical forms of religion
8. A loss of hope
9. A sense of despair
10. A sense of survivor's guilt

These prevalent issues can hit close to home for many Indigenous families. Gross's work delineates a clear and important connection between the cultural traumas Native communities must face and endure. Homelessness is the issue at the heart of *Waikiki*. Kahunahana highlights the bitter truth that over 15,000 folks are estimated to be homeless in Hawai'i and suffer lower life expectancy, high rates of mental illness, addiction, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder ("Homeless in Hawaii: Facts and Resources"). The homeless population in Hawai'i is also overwhelmingly Native Hawaiian. The historical and material conditions that have produced this situation are directly related to the apocalyptic cultural devastation that Native Hawaiians experienced and the critical severing of land-based pedagogies that are central to Kānaka worldviews. The film *Waikiki* sees Kea living out this sense of incredible loss on a personal level. Kea desperately attempts to survive in a post-apocalyptic environment while enduring domestic violence, battling her own mental illnesses, her own despair and loss of hope, and (outside of her work as a cultural teacher) being employed in the prostitution of her own culture.



Kea dancing Hula 'Auana (contemporary hula) for tourists in the film as one of her jobs.



Kea's plastered smile for the guests of a touristy lū'au in Waikiki. Her smile is haunting as viewers know the truth behind her living situation. Adorned in ornamental Hawaiian-esque clothing that does not reflect traditional practices, girls in coconut bras and mishmashed versions of other Polynesian cultures dance for tips from tourists.

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Early in the film, we see Kea dancing hula in Waikiki for tourists in a resort. Like a distorted mirror in a carnival funhouse, Kea's cultural dancing no longer reflects the sacredness the dance holds. At this point in the film, the audience knows Kea is homeless and struggling to make ends meet. The scene showcases a sea of tourists that is a typical sight of Waikiki lū'aus (parties) where visitors go to get an "authentic" Hawaiian experience. In reality, these types of resort spaces embody very little of Kānaka culture. Famously, Haunani-Kay Trask in *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i* tackles issues of cultural prostitution and the pernicious grasp of manufactured Hawaiian cultural expression that multinational resort complexes utilize to entice tourists. Trask is adamant that Hawaiian culture *cannot be ornamental* as seen in spaces such as Waikiki:

...hula dancers wear clownlike makeup, don costumes from a mix of Polynesian cultures, and behave in a manner that is smutty and salacious rather than powerfully erotic... In the hotel version of the hula, the sacredness of the dance has completely evaporated, while the athleticism and sexual expression have been packaged like ornaments. The purpose is entertainment for profit rather than a joyful and truly Hawaiian celebration of human and divine nature. (144)

This striking critique of resort-based hula reverberates to Kea's own dancing to survive in a capitalistic system. Her makeup emphasizes the need to focus on her "customer service" smile. The focused and lingering shot on Kea's smile turns eerie as the subsequent startling cut scenes to her real world are less colorful and vibrant. Hula, a sacred expression of culture, turns into a job and not part of erotic cultural pleasure. The viewer is then confronted with the transformation of Kea and the defacing of hula and Waikiki (a place once known for its spouting waters and lush wetlands) as it once was. Hawai'i, as an idea, becomes packageable and consumable for the tourists, non-Natives, and visitors. It is marked "for sale," thereby removing true Hawaiian cultural context and rendering the tourist versions of Waikiki as capitalistic and meaningless.

As a symptom of PASS, Kea is unable to secure enough stable employment to gain permanent housing. Kea uses public utilities such as beach park showers to maintain hygiene amongst tourists and beach goers while she survives by living out of her van—a familiar and harsh reality that can be witnessed all throughout Hawai'i. This sense of personal loss also culminates in a fiery and distressing one-sided argument Kea has with Wo. Unsure of what to do with Wo after hitting him with her car, she begins spouting vitriol as he sits silently. Kea's boyfriend, who had previously assaulted her, tells her over the phone to "get rid of him" and that Wo is "...using you. Fucking pilau bum, drop him off Wai'anae, get rid of him!" Kea, in a manic spiral afterwards, screams at Wo:

"What am I supposed to do with you? Homeless pilau bum! What would your family think? They must be so fucking ashamed of you. Stupid ass pilau bum! Stop looking at me! Don't you sit there fucking judging me!"

The dialogue in this moment is significant. The signaling of Kea's boyfriend to get rid of Wo in the Wai'anae area of O'ahu is a direct reference to the high houseless population in that part of the

island. Waifanae has the highest concentration of Native Hawaiians in the world and is famously known for having high levels of houselessness. Kea's boyfriend's demands to drop Wo off and forget about him because Wo is using Kea indicates the State of Hawai'i's willful ignorance of the crises that occur on O'ahu and the State's desire to erase unsightly problems. Kea interpellating Wo as a "pilau bum" means he is a dirty, distressing, and parasitic problem. While Wo sits there and just listens to Kea's abusive words, it seems to us viewers that she is actually screaming her own hate for herself and her situation.

Witnessing Kea spiral downwards into a path all too familiar for local families showcases the blatant struggles of homelessness in Hawai'i. Kea screams at Wo because he is a reflection of herself and the consequential severing she has experienced in her own Native lands. The irony of being unable to find a safe place to live on her ancestral lands is the result of many factors: mental health, economic status, and structural dispossession. Kea feels shame and guilt for the situations she finds herself in, even though her situation is symptomatic of the structural inequalities beyond Kea's control.

After Kea's van is towed, she passes out with Wo under a makeshift tent in Kaka'ako Park. In a desperate attempt to secure a place to stay, Kea is told paying in all cash is not an acceptable form of payment from a Waikiki-based realtor and that "[she's] not gonna get a place from anyone... [and] need[s] paystubs." Kea defiantly states, "I had cash. I need that room. I don't have any place to stay," only to be hung up on as the realtor states, "You're not going to qualify for anything." This scene parallels a subsequent moment in which Kea watches Honolulu Police Department officers harassing a homeless man pushing his shopping cart full of possessions near a highly gentrified, high-income area of O'ahu. As the film progresses, viewers are unsure if Wo is real or just a figment of Kea's imagination. This uncertainty is a directorial choice on Kahunahana's part. The central sentiment is simply that Wo and Kea's journeys are deeply intertwined. Kea and Wo strike up a tentative friendship and reliance on each other during Kea's spiral into further disconnection from herself, her family, and her friends. Therefore, much like her berating of Wo feels like self-flagellation, Kea's attempts at comforting Wo by saying, "I know things have been shitty... We are going to be alright. Everything's going to be alright" feels like an empty and hopeless reassurance to herself amongst immense hardships.

Past, Present, & Future Momentums: Native Slipstream in Film

The realities of living in this post-apocalyptic moment in Hawai'i are illuminated through Kahunahana's use of Native Slipstream throughout the film. These temporal movements of slipping between past, present, future, and potentially Kea's own fantasies encompass visual sovereignty through the medium of film. Kahunahana's film engages visual sovereignty by "employing editing technologies that permit filmmakers to stage... Indigenous notions of time and space that are not possible through print alone" (Raheja 1163). Native Slipstream best describes the experimental and surrealist cinematography and pacing of *Waikiki*. Kahunahana himself has stated that film doesn't follow a linear or A-B-C structure as a harkening to Kānaka conceptions of temporality.

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For Kahunahana, the audience needed to be able to “see through/behind/as/in spite of/in contrast” to Kea (Sanders). By exposing different ruptures and self-representations, Kahunahana engages with the Hawaiian praxis of *makawalu* or “eight eyes.” This multi-relationality, multi-dimensional, and holographic way of thinking speaks to the need of looking at things from at least eight different perspectives. These perspectives aren’t limited to humans but include the concepts of time, or even the natural elements of the planet.



A young Kea chants with her grandmother.

Waikiki follows a timeline that swirls together past, present, and future that is interspersed with shots of Kea within the modern landscape of Honolulu, temporality-breaking moments of tenderness with her grandmother, and being in ‘āina. Audience viewers are not sure whether they are viewing Kea’s past, present, or future at any given moment. Kahunahana explains that Kea’s “flashbacks to traumatic events were left intentionally muddy as a means to present memory almost as a form of time travel, and to note the relativity of time” (Sanders). We are taken into the mind of Kea, whose state of being slowly devolves into an enmeshed and increasingly panicked predicament by the end of the film. Visual sovereignty is therefore expressed within a framework of Native Slipstream to engage in a multiplicity of lived realities that have already occurred, are happening now, and will happen in the future.

The organization of the film can be thought of as occurring in two simultaneous, yet psychically different, spaces. The first is the dystopian metropolis of Honolulu and its surrounding districts. Kahunahana emphasizes this dystopian landscape by including prolonged shots of concrete buildings and glassy skyscrapers. While most of the film surrounds Kea’s work in the tourism industry, her boyfriend works in construction and the development of luxury apartment complexes in Honolulu. Scenes that take place in the metropolis are sonically signaled with jetliners and military airplanes that create deafening sounds. The metropolis of Honolulu is in stark contrast to the scenes of Aloha ‘Āina that ground the viewer in what Hawai‘i actually means.

Juxtaposed against the harshness of metropolis is Kea’s longing for re-connection to land. The ultimate message of the film centers around Kea’s journey to (re)connect. In scenes where nature appears in the film, Kea occasionally touches base, as a child, with her grandmother while they sing the *mele* “Ke Ao Nani”—a song about connecting with land and nature. Despite all the chaos that happens in the film, the *mele* works its way back into the film in unexpected moments, especially when Kea’s struggles to survive increases. While sounds of air travel signal the metropolis, Aloha ‘Āina is sonically signaled with Kea and her grandmother’s chanting, the

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A scene of lush waterfalls juxtaposed against the development of Honolulu.



Kea stares at the statue of Queen Lili'uokalani at the State Capitol.

sounds of birds, and the powerful grounding of the ocean currents/waves. Kahunahana highlights that removal of Hawaiians from land with structured dispossession results in intergenerational issues of violence, anger, and abuse. He marks these intergenerational issues on the film by mixing the temporalities and spatialities of the lands and bodies of Hawai'i. In much the same way that viewers are unable to tell past from present from future, they are unable to temporally or spatially differentiate the Hawai'i of the metropolis from Aloha 'Āina.

Conclusion

Wandering with Wo through the metropolis of Honolulu, leads Kea to become broken and exhausted. Eventually she comes to the State Capitol, where she stares at the statue of Queen Lili'uokalani, beckoning for answers that will not come. By the end of the film, we see Kea make her way to Sand Island Park as her boyfriend pursues in an effort to bring her back home after accusing her of mental instability. The film ends on an ambiguous note. We don't see Kea get a job, secure housing, or reconcile with her family. None of the problems that we see Kea attempt



The final scene of Waikiki is of Kea chanting in the middle of Honolulu.

to navigate are solved. The final shot of the film is Kea on her knees desperate for connection to ʻāina as she grasps red volcanic earth in her hands. A solemn stare and last chant from Kea end the film as she faces water and the high-rise buildings in front her. The phrase that echoed from the beginning of the film *He aliʻi ka ʻāina, he kauwa ke kanaka* resonates again with what has been lost for Kea and what urgently needs to be (re)connected.

Waikiki ignites the dire need for reconnecting Kānaka epistemologies to land. Christopher Kahunahana's film highlights the struggles Native Hawaiians face with the ever-increasing threat of being priced out of their own homelands and the cultural trauma that accompanies structured dispossession. Through the struggles of Kea, we see how failure is relegated to Hawaiians who are coping with Post-Apocalyptic Stress Syndrome. While we do not see Kea achieve a typical movie magic ending to her story, the *kahea* or call, to see from multiple perspectives through Kahunahana's ruptures of colonial common sense leaves us, like Kea, seeking more answers.

Notes

1. Other promotional shots for the film featured a bloody "Shaka" image. The Shaka is a hand-gesture associated with Hawai'i as a form of greeting that has frequently been appropriated by outsider surfing culture (particularly California-based) to mean "hang-loose." These promotional images indicate Christopher Kahunahana's commentary on the taking and misappropriation of Hawaiian values and culture.

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