waka kuaka

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REVIEWS

KAHUNAHANA, Christopher (director): *Waikiki*. Island Film Group, Hula Girl Productions, Kinetic Productions, 2020. 1 hr, 17 min.

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Poet, Independent Filmmaker, Producer

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It is not without profound irony that writer, director, producer and editor Christopher Kahunahana's *Waikiki* (2020) is one of the first feature-length narrative movies by a Kanaka ʻŌiwi (Native Hawaiian) filmmaker. *Waikiki* is a long-awaited, seminal work that liberates its viewers from Hollywood's century-old shackles on cinema of and about Hawaiʻi. Sexualized Native characters of purported Hawaiian ancestry are absent: in Hollywood these have included endless close-ups of buttocks, busts and torsos, along with ubiquitous stereotyped portrayals of characters dominated mostly by white movie stars, obsequious Asian servants or morticians, along with ridiculously accented dialogue in which proliferate butcherings of at least three languages: English, Hawaiʻi Creole English (a.k.a. "Pidgin") and the Hawaiian language itself. Frustrating, yes, but such images continue to appear in movie theatres, on network TV and on streaming platforms despite pushback from a vibrant Kanaka ʻŌiwi and local film community of practice.[1]

Alternatively, Kahunahana's *Waikiki* is the go-to feature movie of Hawaiʻi that viewers, teachers, students and every aficionado of film should respect, appreciate and study. Cunningly resisting such stereotypes, Kahunahana purposely removed the diacritical kahakō (macron) from Waikīkī in the title of his film. Upon analysis of this strategy, we learn that wai in ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi (Hawaiian language) refers to fresh water; kīkī evokes the abundance of freshwater springs of ancient Waikīkī. Significantly, kiki without this diacritical spelling or pronunciation can not only refer to a plug or to the filling in of a hole—something to patch, such as a canoe or calabash—but also evoke images of stinging, pecking and making disagreeable remarks. Indeed, *Waikiki* is brimming with discomfort.

The *Waikiki* movie poster (Fig. 1) prominent on many websites reveals the lead character, Kea (Danielle Zalopany), arrayed with a dazzling if not ostentatious headdress of exotic tropical flowers. Her face is overly made up, lips crimson, shadows concealing nearly half of her face. Rather than an enticing smile, Kea's eyes are averted. She's looking away from the camera



Figure 1. *Waikiki*, 2020, movie poster. Courtesy of the filmmaker, Christopher Kahunahana.

lens, her face wary, worried, as if in the presence of a threatening wave or ominous power. As the film progresses, Kea's worried state of mind grows increasingly afflicted by circumstances beyond her control. And she is far from alone, as just about everyone from Hawai'i knows from experience the challenges that countless residents relentlessly face, day after day, year after year, generation after generation.

Over the course of the film, Kea endures a series of compounding struggles, her character mirroring the dire plight of being unable to qualify to rent her own place due to credit checks, low pay stubs and gate-keeping rental property managers. Even as a teacher at a Hawaiian-language-based school, having

ample cash from her part-time job as a hostess in a Chinatown bar as well as occasionally performing "hula" in a Waikīkī hotel, she cannot rent her own apartment. Kea refuses to go back to her abusive boyfriend, Brandon (Jason Quinn), which means, however, that she cannot see their child or their child's grandmother. For now, she must sleep in her old Toyota minivan.

While fleeing in her minivan from Brandon's violence and abuse, she desperately calls him in a state of panic after she hits a stranger on the street, Wo (Peter Shinkoda), knocking him unconscious. Brandon begs Kea to drive away from the scene, leaving Wo unattended in a hit-and-run. Stubbornly, Kea refuses to listen, hangs up on Brandon, climbs out from her van and renders aid to Wo, who is not only homeless but virtually muted by past traumas.

A basic Chinese-to-English app translates "Wo" as "I" or "me." Kahunahana, who has experienced his own share of poverty, has on one hand perhaps cast an imagined version of himself. Even more significant, however, "Wo is us" (pun intended)—and if not us, Wo could well be one of our siblings, an extended family member stricken by bad fortune exacerbated by mental illness and the ongoing legacies of colonialism; Wo could also be a friend or neighbour, as Kahunahana poignantly reminds viewers in any number of his online interviews.

Ironically, Kahunahana's film takes place just about everywhere in Honolulu *except* Waikīkī, which makes his title impactfully significant. Through Kea and Wo, viewers are not introduced to the false illusions of Hawai'i's tourism industry. Rather, we're seeing the other side of "paradise". With the exception of a few scenes where Kea is performing hapa-haole (hybridised) hula in a hotel setting and much later riding in a taxi cruising down Kalākaua after a night of working in a hostess club, almost all of Kahunahana's scenes are filmed outside of the usual tourist zones: in Chinatown's back alleys and bars, in flood-prone Kaka'ako, on Sand Island (an artificially dredged island, formerly named Quarantine Island[2]), or on (US Navy Admiral Chester William) Nimitz Highway, a major traffic corridor that leads to and from the Honolulu international airport, named in honour of (yet another) US military veteran, the late US Senator Daniel K. Inouye.

Recently, several locally based filmmakers of both Native and non-Native ancestry have released notable features set in Hawai'i; however, as of this writing, in both reviewers' opinions, to date there is no feature, here or abroad, that comes close to evoking such emotions, images, actions and dire circumstances as *Waikiki*.[3] Interviews reveal that Kahunahana cut his teeth watching an international array of directors thanks to the Hawai'i International Film Festival's once free admission policies; to Kahunahana's mother, who would borrow videotapes from his maternal aunt; and to the proprietor of the Honolulu Movie Museum, who would loan Kahunahana videos with no strict return due date.

To quote Native Hawaiian activist and musician George Helm (1950–1977), Kahunahana has done "his homework", and *Waikiki* attests to this director's eclectic filmic tastes. For instance, there is a setting in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1964 film *Red Desert* featuring a woman lead, Giuliana (Monica Vitti), who is surrounded by wealth and business suits. She is distraught with and disconnected from her superficial society. Her confusion is juxtaposed by an ever-transitioning Italy, environmental pollution, architectural structures imposed upon once natural landscapes, and the pervasive presence of capitalist, hedonistic and superficial values. Over a half century later, midway around the globe, Kahunahana's character Kea struggles to survive the brutality of a failed relationship and abandonment as a child, an inability to find her own dwelling, and a growing sense of desperation, confusion and alienation (Fig. 2).

Director Akira Kurosawa's film of poverty *Dodes'ka-den* also sports a character, Rokuchan, who is apparently in bliss despite his family's lack of material possessions and happily transforms his junkyard world into a make-believe trainyard. Unlike Rokuchan, however, who is confined to the dumpsite where he and a handful of the abject poor live, Kea literally roams through the hard streets of Honolulu. Soon, viewers begin to wonder if she's ever going to survive and find stability despite her heartfelt flashbacks of her grandmother (Fig. 3) along with her nightmare memories of being abandoned and assaulted as a youth. Not once in Kea's adulthood does she find solace sunbathing at the beach or swimming in the ocean. Nor do we see her with friends and family. Instead, viewers confront images of rampant construction, aerial footage of Waikīkī's concrete jungle, endless traffic and local bullies in a restaurant who try to humiliate Wo, whom Kea passionately



Figure 2. Film still. Christopher Kahunahana, *Waikiki*, 2020. Courtesy of the filmmaker.



Figure 3. Film still. Christopher Kahunahana, *Waikiki*, 2020. Courtesy of the filmmaker.

defends, a nonviolent teachable moment directed at all who dared to belittle her vulnerable friend. Soon, one is not sure whether Kea—whose name can be translated in ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi as "pure" and "clean" or could be a play on words in Hawaiʻi Creole English to mean "care"—is hallucinating, dreaming or literally moving through heavy traffic riding on the handlebars of a wobbly bicycle that Wo is pedalling.

One can also see the powerful influences of Māori director Lee Tamahori's 1994 film *Once Were Warriors*. In that film, fleeing a broken-down family and horrific abuse, a 14-year old Māori daughter, Grace Heke (Mamaengaroa Kerr-Bell), escapes to a destitute camp where her friend Toot (Shannon Williams) lives under an overpass in a wrecked shell of a car. Grace had been raped by her abusive father's brother, her Uncle Bully (Cliff Curtis),[4] and she seeks refuge there in Toot's shelter. Toot offers sincere respite, but when he attempts to gently kiss her, she is enraged. Darkness will be met by darkness, and her mother (Rena Owen) will find her hanging from a tree. In a loop that reverberates and echoes filmic themes within *Waikiki*, Kea is, at the end of Kahunahana's film, far from suicidal, but wholly enveloped in a cityscape-like net that offers no escape from her deepening crisis (Fig. 4).

Kahunahana notably secured music rights to include Brother Noland Conjugacion's song "Look What They've Done", composed when Brother Noland was in high school (Kamehameha Schools, Kapālama, class of 1975) and hitting the airwaves in 1980, exactly 40 years before *Waikiki* was released.[5] Noland's song, timely cultural commentary on the underside of reality in Hawaiʻi, tracks twice during the film and is especially poignant during the film's outro when the credits are rolling:



Figure 4. Film still. Christopher Kahunahana, *Waikiki*, 2020. Courtesy of the filmmaker.

Come down with me
Have you ever tripped through reality?
Come down with me
Come down and see
Come see what they've done to Waikiki

And ask me why?
Won't you open your eyes?
Can't you see we lost our paradise?
There's too many people
Not enough sand
Can't they see we want our land?[6]

The film's end foreshadows profound concern. Brandon, eyes watery—sitting in her van that he apparently recovered from the towing company—watches Kea helplessly from a distance. She is sitting on the ground in public view, facing the waterfront with Aloha Tower in the distance surrounded by office buildings and towering condominiums. Kea is performing a hula noho (seated hula) quietly, almost feebly, uttering a chant, "Ke Ao Nani", that she was taught in childhood, a singing version originally composed by Mary Kawena Pukui (1895–1986). More like a lamentation than a lovely chant or song "for the children", Kea's hand is seen grasping bone-dry dirt that falls from her outstretched palm (Fig. 5). Kea herself is transfigured into the impoverished ʻāina (land) itself, a land bereft of its Native people, food gardens replaced by concrete, steel, and now, infertile earth: "Haʻina mai ka puana / A he nani ke ao nei" (Tell the refrain / Of this beautiful world).[7]



Figure 5. Film still. Christopher Kahunahana, *Waikiki*, 2020. Courtesy of the filmmaker.

The movie poster now seems to speak volumes. Kea, the child once pure and innocent, a beauty in adulthood, is a woman abused, abandoned, alone, houseless, robbed of her dignity, grace and livelihood. This scene plays out powerfully in contrast to the film's title. What hath the tourist mecca of Waikīkī wrought? Who is Kea? Why is this happening to her? She cares deeply, but who will care for her? The Native Hawaiian ʻōlelo noʻeau (poetic proverb) referenced throughout the film is: "He aliʻi ka ʻāina, he kauwā ke kanaka" (The land is a chief, man is her servant). Kahunahana cinematically transposes this proverb, and Kea's circumstances manifest a five-alarm metamorphosis, not just for herself but for her Native people and the ʻāina itself.

Contemporary Native Hawaiian poets from Wayne Kaumualii Westlake (1947–1984) to Haunani-Kay Trask (1949–2021) to Hawaiʻi's poet laureate Brandy Nālani McDougall have portrayed Waikīkī as a monster of neglect, feeding an insatiable, land-eating military, perpetuating a deafened and corrupt government exacerbated by a pervasive tourist-based industrial complex. Countless Kānaka ʻŌiwi continue to face increasing poverty, alienation from the ʻāina and struggle in ever-worsening conditions, while visitors by the millions perpetually stream into one of the world's most famous tourist destinations. Arriving by the jetload, by monstrous passenger ships or by simply turning on their electronic devices and watching endless images of a paradisiacal Hawaiʻi, we hope this film will remind tourists and viewers alike that there are more Native Hawaiians who have been forced to move away from the so-called "50th state" than are living and working here in Hawaiʻi nei, the Motherland, itself. Most significantly, Kahunahana's *Waikiki* reveals that aloha ʻāina (love of the land) is paramount to caring for society's mental, physical and spiritual health.

Notes

1. While *Waikiki* was in postproduction, Kanaka ʻŌiwi filmmakers Justyn Ah Chong and ʻĀina Paikai released their short narrative film *Down on the Sidewalk in Waikīkī* (2019). Departing from a collection of poems of the same name that Hawaiian poet, journalist and activist Wayne Kaumualii Westlake (1947–1984) wrote while working as a janitor in Waikīkī from 1972 to 1973, the film follows a soft-spoken janitor named Kealiʻi as he works through the struggles of daily life in "paradise", cleaning up after an endless parade of tourists with no regard for the land they are visiting or its caretakers. Like Kahunahana, Ah Chong and Paikai lend their vision to one of Hawaiʻi's most devastated and beloved places, where a spirited battle of narratives continues to unfold daily.
2. "The dredge sediment from deepening the channels was deposited on the shallow off-shore reef, creating an island called Quarantine Island, now known as Sand Island. Quarantine Island was used to isolate ships with contagious diseases on-board" (Department of Transportation, Government of Hawaii). https://hidot.hawaii.gov/harbors/history/
3. *Molokaʻi Bound*, a new feature by Kanaka ʻŌiwi director Alika Tengan, is slated to open for its Hawaiʻi premiere during the 44th Hawaiʻi International Film Festival in 2024.
4. Kahunahana also includes an Uncle Bully (Kimo Kahoano) in his film.
5. Interview with Brother Noland, 13 June 2024: https://alohagotsoul.com/blogs/stories/interview-with-brother-noland-part-2
6. A recent interviewer asked Brother Noland: "Tell me what the song 'Look What They've Done' is about." Noland responds: "If you listen to it today, if you're familiar with Waikīkī, you're gonna relate it to something, like 'wow, I've seen that', lyric-wise. The whole thing about it is, I wrote that in 1970-something and it's still relevant. When I wrote it, I was in middle school or high school. I was just becoming one man and noticing things and you like scrap; and I'm a native and I'm indigenous, like 'look at this shit!'. You radical, yeah? All my friends, because we grew up in the projects, we were all radical. I would play that song for friends, and they all loved that song, because it's talking about us, 'look what we gotta deal with', you know? Because we come from this place. Like, are you willing to die in this place? And that's how we feel afterwards: we're being displaced." https://alohagotsoul.com/blogs/stories/interview-with-brother-noland-part-2
7. The song's full lyrics are available here: https://www.huapala.org/Ke/Ke_Ao_Nani.html

Glossary

The terms in this glossary are Hawaiian.

ʻāina	land, that which feeds
aloha ʻāina	love of the land
hapa-haole	part white and part Hawaiian, hybridised
hula noho	seated hula

kahakō	macron
ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi	Hawaiian language
ʻōlelo noʻeau	poetic proverb
wai	fresh water

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DAVIDSON, Jared: *Blood and Dirt: Prison Labour and the Making of New Zealand.* Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2023. 296 pp., ack., bib., ed. note, images, index, notes, prologue. NZ$50.00 (hardcover), EPUB, PDF.

LUCY MACKINTOSH
Tāmaki Paenga Hira | Auckland War Memorial Museum

The title of Jared Davidson's book *Blood and Dirt*, taken from the well-known Marxist quote that capital "comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (p. 34), tells us from the outset that this history of prison labour is about class, capital, labour, power and violence in the making of Aotearoa New Zealand. Beginning with the first permanent Pākehā (New Zealand European) settlement in New Zealand, Davidson retells the recent history of New Zealand through the prism of prison labour, leaving the reader with new perspectives on the colonisation of New Zealand and the ways that unfree labour has shaped this country's human and physical environment.

Davidson argues that unfree labour has been core to the colonial project from the very beginning of European settlement, in ways that have not always been recognised. Historians have largely focused on the work of the missionaries at Hohi mission station, established by Samuel Marsden in 1814, but Davidson recentres the narrative around the convict labourers who helped build the mission station and the detained offenders who were used for ongoing labour. Davidson places the origins of prison labour in New Zealand within the context of capitalist imperatives of improvement, or making profit from the land, a concept that was central to the economic and social changes in Britain from the sixteenth century. While the links between work and the concept of improvement on mission stations have been discussed before, notably by Tony Ballantyne in his 2015 work *Entanglements of Empire*, Davidson expands the discussion into the origins of incarceration and forced labour in Britain, linking the genealogy of prisons with the origins of capitalism and documenting how prisons, as both places and a set of social relations, arrived in New Zealand with the first missionaries. "Hohi was more than a state-sanctioned religious settlement", writes Davidson. "It was a prison wing of New South Wales, a local lockup and a house of correction all in one" (p. 38).