Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada

Find Mana in the Mundane: Telling Hawaiian Mo‘olelo in Comics

The Hawaiian people have made great strides in the areas of linguistic and cultural revival ever since the Hawaiian Renaissance[1] that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Various institutions and grass-roots groups, such as Hawaiian-language programs (community or academically based), hālau hula, and Hawai‘i-based publishers with a greater cultural awareness have ensured that our ‘ōlelo and our mo‘olelo, our language and our stories, are once again seen and heard in an increasing number of everyday contexts: restaurants, grocery stores, books, television and the internet. As with any mass movement, however, this revitalization of culture and language has not encompassed all levels of the Hawaiian population.

Large gaps in cultural and linguistic knowledge have formed in the Hawaiian community, neatly following generational lines. In my family, for example, my maternal grandmother was a native speaker of Hawaiian and I am privileged enough both culturally and financially to have achieved a certain level of language ability from the university, but my mother speaks no Hawaiian and even ruefully tells the story of how, as a girl, she used to ignore her tūtū whenever he spoke Hawaiian to her. The denigration of the Hawaiian culture had become so ingrained in our society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries[2] that many parents decided not to teach their children certain types of knowledge, such as language, cultural practice, or even mo‘olelo, as this knowledge seemingly had no place in the modern world. Again, my own family is exemplary, as my tūtū is said to have decided not to pass on a certain type of traditional healing in which he was an expert.

A great number of Hawaiians born and raised during the first three quarters of the twentieth century were not taught their language and culture by their parents, and later, many of them were too old to take advantage of the opportunities to learn these things that they had helped to provide for their own children. My family is by no means unique in that our language use or cultural practice has skipped a generation or ceased completely, as many families also have ‘lost generations’ that have been culturally left behind. Many of these Hawaiians thirst for the knowledge that they missed out on and the stories that they have never heard, but also feel that they do not have the means to access them or that it is too late for them to successfully learn Hawaiian or join a hālau hula or work in a taro patch.

The efforts to reinvigorate and recirculate our ‘ōlelo and mo‘olelo have mainly and justifiably been aimed at young children, though attempts have been made to address the needs of the older generations as well. Yet this two-pronged approach dedicating our efforts towards our children and our parents actually threatens to create another lost generation. Our mo‘olelo are presented in colorful picture books for children such as *No Ka ‘Elepaio Kolohe: The Naughty ‘Elepaio*[3] and *The Legend of*

[1] Some historians consider the cultural revival that took place under the reign of David Kalākaua to be the First Hawaiian Renaissance, with the revival of the 1960s and 1970s as the Second Hawaiian Renaissance.

[2] Hawaiian authors decried this decline since at least the 1860s, but it is more visible during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; English became the medium of instruction for all government-subsidized schools, students were punished for speaking Hawaiian, and parents were advised not to teach it to their children.

[3] Malia Kruger, *No Ka ‘Elepaio Kolohe: The Naughty ‘Elepaio* (Honolulu: Kamehameha Schools Press, 2008).

Anglistica 14. 2 (2010), 107-117 ISSN: 2035-8504

Kuamoʻo Moʻokini and Hamumu, the Great Whale[4] and in novel-length literary translations or re-presentations of traditional stories for a more 'sophisticated' audience such as *The Epic Tale of Hiʻiakaikapoliopele*[5] and *Ka Moʻolelo Hiwahiwa o Kawelo*.[6] Yet, there are no versions of our moʻolelo explicitly aimed at those in these in-between generations, especially if they are not already avid readers.[7]

For many of us, if we want to read Hawaiian publications, we often have to produce them ourselves or help others facilitate their production, striving to do what Hawaiian scholar Noenoe Silva has described as "free[ing] our ancestral stories from the captured state, such that they become healthy frameworks for our own communal self-understanding, antidotes to the poisonous stereotypes of the colonizer".[8] The building of these "healthy frameworks" entails a move towards presenting moʻolelo in mundane rather than 'high' art forms, and this paper will explore how this move towards seemingly less threatening or valorized art forms can help prevent these in-between generations from being culturally left behind and contribute to what Scott Richard Lyons (Ojibwe/Dakota) has termed "rhetorical sovereignty".[9] The paper will then examine how comics in particular can serve as an important new vessel for our moʻolelo and describe a graphic novel project that I am a part of in which we are trying to harness what Rocco Versaci has called comics' "powerful marginality".[10]

E iho ana o luna, e pii ana o lalo: The high shall be made low, and the low shall be raised up

Because we have been told who we are by other people for so long, Hawaiian identity and self-definition often start at a disadvantage and many facets of our culture have been dismissed as nothing more than outdated artifacts. Powerful stories and traditions have been co-opted and uprooted from their cultural contexts to be rendered as nothing more than innocuous reminders of a bygone era. Without culturally-relevant and carefully-constructed Hawaiian texts (in the broad sense of the term, including written, chanted, sung, and spoken texts) staking out a place for Hawaiian cultural practice in this current era and embracing these in-between generations, the damaging and oppressive images and stereotypes that often come from the classroom and the media constantly abrade and erode the foundations of cultural identity that we work so hard to build. Our moʻolelo contain our history, our worldview, even our genealogy, and in order to do them justice, we must strive for the "rhetorical sovereignty" that Scott Richard Lyons describes.

Lyons defines the overall pursuit of sovereignty very elegantly as "an attempt to revive not our past, but our possibilities" (449). This idea of sovereignty applies very directly to Hawaiian attempts to regain their self-determination, but also the desire to tell/read/hear our own stories. Lyons terms "rhetorical sovereignty" as "the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse" (449–450). If Hawaiians focus on struggling for rhetorical sovereignty

[4] Leimomi Moʻokini Lum, *The Legend of Kuamoʻo Moʻokini and Hamumu, the Great Whale* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 2004).

[5] Hoʻoulumāhiehie, *The Epic Tale of Hiʻiakaikapoliopele*, trans. by Puakea Nogelmeier, Sahoa Fukushima, and Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada (Honolulu: Awaiāulu Press, 2007).

[6] Hoʻoulumāhiehie, *Ka Moʻolelo Hiwahiwa o Kawelo,* ed. by Hiapokeikikāne Kichie Perreira (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 2009).

[7] Hawaiian artist Solomon Enos had a serial comic strip entitled *Polyfantastica*, but it was more a reimagining of a broader Hawaiian and Polynesian history than a retelling of any specific moʻolelo. See *Polyfantastica* <http://www.polyfantastica.org>.

[8] Noenoe Silva, "Pele, Hiʻiaka, and Haumea: Women and Power in Two Hawaiian Moʻolelo", *Pacific Studies,* 30.1–2 (2007), 160.

[9] Scott Richard Lyons, "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?", *College Composition and Communication,* 51.3 (2000), 447–468.

[10] Rocco Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* (New York: Continuum Books, 2007).

within the larger movement for self-determination, we can pay more attention to "the goals, modes, styles, and languages" of the texts that we produce and direct them at the segments of our community that need them most.

Breaking mo'olelo into its constituent parts 'mo'o' and "ōlelo'[11] helps illustrate why these stories are so important to the community. 'Mo'o' gets translated as 'succession' and "ōlelo' as language, talk, or speaking, so a common understanding of 'mo'olelo' is as a succession of talk, which often gets read as a reference to the way stories and knowledge were passed down through the Hawaiian oral tradition. This succession matches what Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*:

> For many indigenous writers stories are ways of passing down the beliefs and values of a culture in the hope that the new generations will treasure them and pass the story down further. The story and storyteller both serve to connect the past with the future, one generation with the other, the land with the people and the people with the story.[12]

Thomas King (Cherokee) neatly sums this idea up by stating: "The truth about stories is that that's all we are".[13] In the Hawaiian understanding of mo'olelo, the lineal and generational quality of stories along with their capacity to carry culture really helps to explain how mana, the spiritual power and reverence that can be accumulated in all things, accrues to these stories as they are passed from person to person. Storytellers imbue their stories with breath and mana through the act of telling and their listeners inhale this mana and then have the chance to retell the story and add their breath to it as well. A further indication of the way mana accrues to stories is that each variation and variant of a story is itself called a mana. This recognizes that the diversity and variation among our stories is the very thing that gives them their mana, or power. This means that in order to re-empower our mo'olelo, we have to insure that they exist in various versions, styles, and forms, both elite and mundane.

Many of the strides that Hawaiians have made over the last handful of decades in the pursuit of rhetorical sovereignty have been about 'modernizing' and moving Hawaiian cultural practices into the fields of high art or working towards recognition of Hawaiian arts as 'serious' art. For example, singer and kumu hula Keali'i Reichel and others have taken hula and Hawaiian music to prestigious venues such as Carnegie Hall, Hawaiian operas and hula dramas are regularly performed at the Hawai'i Theatre, and Hawaiian art and artists are regularly featured in galleries and museums throughout the state. The last major translation project I was involved in,[14] the translation of *Ka Mo'olelo o Hi'iakaikapoliopele*, was also meant to carve out a space for Hawaiian mo'olelo in the realm of high art. We had two limited-run "Centennial" versions: a slip-cased edition which sold for $300, and a clamshell edition which was hand bound by Gregor Campbell in goatskin leather and green moiré fabric that sold for $1500. There is currently an initiative afoot to fund the donation of 200 copies of the clamshell edition "to major institutions of learning in the United States, Europe, and Pacific nations".[15]

[11] 'Mo'olelo' is actually a contraction of 'mo'o'ōlelo'. Though both are used, 'mo'olelo' is more common.

[12] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed, 2004), 144.

[13] Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 2.

[14] The translation project was headed by long-time Hawaiian-language translator Puakea Nogelmeier, while Sahoa Fukushima and I served as apprentice translators and editors.

[15] "Wehena – The Hi'iaka Landmark Initiative", *Awaiāulu: Hawaiian Literature Project*, <http://www.awaiaulu.org/landmark.html>, 5 December 2010.

Though these attempts to justify the inclusion of Hawaiian art forms among these other high art forms have done a lot of very important work in terms of increasing the visibility of these Hawaiian arts and artists, this 'respectability' comes in large part from Hawaiian artists participating and performing in modes and styles that are recognizable to and appreciated by Western audiences and critics. Two consequences of this approach are that a very clear 'Hawaiian' identity has developed around these art forms and a lot of energy has gone into ensuring that Hawaiian arts and mo'olelo are considered worthy of inclusion among the other high arts. While those two consequences actually seem pretty positive, two further issues arise out of them: 1) elite, fine arts are almost by definition not for a popular audience and 2) some of these art forms have become so elevated and so charged with 'Hawaiian-ness' that other Hawaiians who are less well-versed culturally become intimidated and turned away by the very thing that they desire.

Many Hawaiians have come through a heavily Westernized school system in which their culture and history were absent. This system reinforced the notion that the fine arts were things that 'high-class' white elites did: painting, literature, ballet, opera, modern dance, etc. The high-level of 'respect' for and dogged protection of similarly elite Hawaiian art forms has also succeeded at times in dissuading our young people from taking part in them because they are too 'serious', too elite, both in the Hawaiian and Western contexts. Having Hawaiian culture taken seriously is clearly something that we need to continue to strive for, but some of these connections to high art, instead of raising the esteem of many of these arts, have served to alienate large swathes of the young Hawaiian population, who see these arts as 'not for them'. Framing Hawaiian arts as elite art forms, predominantly conforming to Western systems of values, can also allow outsiders to consume Hawaiian arts in ways that are palatable and understandable to them, oftentimes reducing cultural practices such as oli (chanting) and hula to nothing more than innocuous 'song and dance'.

Yet, this innocuousness that has for so long stripped these practices of their cultural context and value can be deployed to our advantage. Anishinaabe poet and author Gerald Vizenor's concept of "survivance" is an important concept here in moving towards showing these 'in-between' generations that Hawaiian art and mo'olelo really are 'for them' and exposing an often unsympathetic general public to our mo'olelo in a way that can allow them to see why we fight and where we come from. Vizenor has defined "survivance" in many ways, but his explanation from *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* is particularly fitting here: "Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction".[16] Rather than a passive survival, Vizenor's notion of survivance encompasses and calls for all the sorts of things that native peoples have done and continue to do to ensure their survival as a culturally distinct people.

Hawaiian-language scholar and translator Puakea Nogelmeier's idea of a "movement of insistence" is also useful here. He coined the phrase to "describe the vitality and confidence of the newly-expanded Hawaiian presence in the

[16] Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1994), vii.

[17] M. Puakea Nogelmeier, *Mai Pa'a i ka Leo: Historical Voice in Hawaiian Primary Materials, Looking Forward and Listening Back* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 2010), 86.

newspapers after the start of the native press".[17] This vitality and confidence drove Hawaiians in the nineteenth century to take up literacy on a national level and use the relatively new technology of the newspapers in culturally appropriate ways that benefitted Hawaiian aims. Nogelmeier uses this idea of "insistence" to make it clear that Hawaiians were not just taking action in response or resistance to foreigners; they actively asserted themselves and their culture through whatever means were available to them.

Both survivance and insistence resonate with the Hawaiian concept of "onipa'a', which was the motto of both Kamehameha V and Queen Lili'uokalani. 'Onipa'a commonly gets translated as "steadfast"; yet, as with most translation, this does not really encompass the entirety of the word. More of the word's meaning can be seen when one breaks 'onipa'a down into its component parts: "oni' and 'pa'a'. "Oni' refers to movement, motion, and shifting, while 'pa'a' means to be fixed, solid, rooted, and/or complete. The range of meaning here is much greater than the lack of forward motion and fixity implied by 'steadfast'. When Hawaiians are 'onipa'a, then, it implies that they are moving and taking action while still being firmly rooted in their culture and beliefs.

Seen as survivance and insistence, 'onipa'a highlights all of the actions, ranging from the openly resistant to the quietly mundane, that Hawaiians have taken to protect their culture from foreign encroachment. Our culture, beliefs, and stories live in the mundane practices of everyday life just as much, and perhaps even more, than some of the more demonstrative and seemingly elitist acts of survivance, insistence, and 'onipa'a. Preparing and eating food, interacting with our family, joking with friends, killing time, talking story, all of these everyday practices are strongholds of our stories and worldview, and it is to the everyday that 'onipa'a should take us next. We need to work on bringing our 'ōlelo and mo'olelo back into the realm of the mundane. Eating and hanging out with friends are innocuous acts that seem like the least political and subversive acts possible, but these acts from the realm of the mundane are deeply powerful "possibilities", in Lyons's sense of the word, that can easily carry our culture and mo'olelo past the defenses of even the most ardent opponents of Hawaiian sovereignty because they seem so non-threatening on the surface.

Escape from the Mundane: Comics as 'Onipa'a

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith asserts, "The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices – all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope".[18] In the Hawaiian community, these mundane acts are, in certain ways, at the margins of the marginalized, neither threatening enough to be suppressed or demonstrative enough to be taken up as a means of resistance. They are 'innocuous'. Yet, as Hawai'i music scholar Aiko Yamashiro has pointed out, innocuous art forms such as popular music are "often seen as 'harmless' and 'light', thereby eluding criticism

[18] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing,* 4.

and closer thought".[19] The marginal and 'harmless' status accorded to non-elite art forms is the very thing that enables us to use these forms and styles to subvert the rhetorical imperialism that Scott Richard Lyons describes as "the ability of dominant powers to assert control of others by setting the terms of debate. These terms are often definitional – that is, they identify the parties discussed by describing them in certain ways".[20] To begin to set the terms of the debate, the strategies of insistence and survivance demand that our mo'olelo have as much and as many mana as possible. We need to steal a page from hegemonic popular culture's playbook and have our mo'olelo infiltrate public consciousness through every possible mode, including the less well-regarded and more popular art forms such as comics, anime, video games, and clothing.[21] Mo'olelo need to become so ubiquitous and everyday that they can do the work of 'onipa'a without seeming to. That way, we can replace the damaging definitions supported by rhetorical imperialism, and work towards defining ourselves.

By focusing on comics as an example, we can see how a popular and somewhat still-maligned genre can be transformed from a carrier of damaging stereotypical images into an effective way to disseminate our culture and identity to both outsiders and our own people alike. Comics critic Rocco Versaci describes one of the more insistent aspects of comics as follows: "comics are not expected to deliver significant social or political criticism and therefore possess what I call a 'powerful marginality' insofar as they are freer to express subversive or unpopular political ideas".[22] This "powerful marginality" has drawn many native peoples to the comic form as well, moving them to produce graphic novels and comics such as *Maui: Legends of the Outcast*,[23] *Strong Man*,[24] *Koda the Warrior*,[25] *Tribal Force*,[26] and *Peace Party*[27] (to name only a handful) that tell their own stories and present their own heroes.

According to Tony Chavarria (Santa Clara Pueblo), the curator of Comic Art Indigéne, an exhibition of Native American artists that work in the comics tradition: "it is only natural that this marginal art appeals to oft-marginalized indigenous people, for both have been regarded as a primitive and malignant presence on the American landscape".[28] Despite the critical acclaim showered upon graphic novels like Alan Moore's *Watchmen*,[29] Art Spiegelman's *Maus*,[30] and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*,[31] the term 'comic book' is still often used as a pejorative for something that is 'made for kids', 'crass', 'popular', or 'unrealistic'. In the United States, a huge public backlash took place against comics, which had been portrayed as "one of the causes of juvenile delinquency"; this came to a head with the 1954 Senate Subcommittee hearing and the establishment of the Comics Code.[32]

Some comics critics regard the witch hunt of the '40s and '50s as a dark time for the genre, fueled by misdirected parental hysterics.[33] The point, however, is that *those parents were right*. Though I doubt that comics really cause juvenile delinquency, their "powerful marginality" can easily subvert the established order. As Edward Said pointed out about his early fascination with comics in his introduction to Joe Sacco's graphic novel *Palestine*:

[19] Aiko Yamashiro, "Ethics in Song: Becoming Kama'āina in Hapa-Haole Music", *Cultural Analysis: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Folklore and Popular Culture,* 8.1 (2009), <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~caforum/>, 11 November 2010.

[20] Scott Richard Lyons, "Rhetorical Sovereignty", 452.

[21] Hawaiian-themed clothing designs are popular, but often lack deep or nuanced understandings of culture and mo'olelo. An exciting intervention is apparel company Ke Alo Piko, whose designs come from a strong cultural background and careful research. Even their clothing tags, which they call "story tags" help pass on mo'olelo. See *Ke Alo Piko* (2009), <http://www.kealopiko.com>. 11 November 2010.

[22] Rocco Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language*, 149.

[23] Robert Sullivan, *Maui: Legends of the Outcast* (Auckland: Godwit Publishing, 2000).

[24] Ishmael Hope, *Strong Man* (Juneau: Alaska ICE, 2007).

[25] Mark L. Mindt, *Koda the Warrior* (Harvey, ND: Pony Gulch Publishing, 2003).

[26] Jon Proudstar, *Tribal Force* (Los Angeles: Mystic Comics, 1996).

[27] Rob Schmidt, *Peace Party* (Culver City, CA: Blue Corn Comics, 1999).

[28] Tony Chavarria, "Indigenous Comics in the United States", *World Literature Today*, 83.3 (2009), 47.

> [comics] seemed to say what couldn't otherwise be said, perhaps what wasn't permitted to be said or imagined, defying the ordinary processes of thought, which are policed, shaped, and re-shaped by all sorts of pedagogical as well as ideological pressures. I knew nothing of this then, but I felt that comics freed me to think and imagine and see differently.[34]

This idea of comics freeing us to "think and imagine and see differently" is a powerful facet of the genre, but it also leads to their dismissal as incapable of anything but 'escapism'.

This 'escapism' is not necessarily a bad thing, as one of the main lures of comics is that they can indeed be fun. Even the idea of escape itself can be turned to survivant purposes, as can be seen in Versaci's reframing:

> [D]espite the great diversity among the many texts that surround our lives, they nevertheless have a common thread: however beautifully or ineptly or movingly or lifelessly conveyed, these works are someone's interpretation of how the world in which we live either is or was or should be or might be or might have been .... Seen in this light, "escape" does not have to preclude thinking; escape into these diverse worlds might mean, paradoxically, that we encounter meanings that are often lost in the chaotic din of our lives.[35]

Derek Parker Royal provides an analysis of how easily comics can offer this 'escape':

> Because they utilize picture texts to guide our understanding of narrative, comics can have a more direct effect than that dictated by prose, eliciting a reaction that takes relatively little time to process. And given its reliance on symbols and iconography, comic art speaks in a language that is accessible to a wide audience, transcending many of the national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries imposed by other media and giving it a reach that is as democratic as it is immediate.[36]

Just as Vizenor took the oft-passive idea of survival and turned it into an active strategy for 'onipa'a, we can harness the marginality of comics and the seemingly carefree idea of escape and turn them into active and insistent tools that will help us to envision, create, and move towards a changed world, where our mo'olelo have more mana.

Faster than a Speeding . . . Ma'a?: Constructing a Hawaiian Comic

In May 2008, the publishing arm of an organization dedicated to the advancement and education of Hawaiian youth contacted me about working with them as one of two 'cultural consultants' to collaboratively research and write a series of bi-lingual comics (separate volumes for Hawaiian and English) based on traditional Hawaiian mo'olelo culled mainly from Hawaiian-language archival and newspaper sources. The creative team brings together people with a variety of strengths, such as publishing experience, archival research skills, and cultural knowledge, and we answer to an editorial board made up of authors, cultural practitioners, academics, activists, and others in order to have a more collaborative and community-based focus on creating these texts. We were given a lot of leeway to propose topics for

[29] Alan Moore, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1986–1987).

[30] Art Spiegelman, *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Pantheon, 1986).

[31] Frank Miller, *The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 1986).

[32] Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form, & Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 39.

[33] Amy Kiste Nyberg, "William Gaines and the Battle over EC Comics", in Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, eds., *A Comics Studies Reader* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 63. Rocco Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language*, 105.

[34] Edward Said, Introduction, in Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2002), ii.

[35] Rocco Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language*, 5–6.

[36] Derek Parker Royal, "Foreword; Or Reading within the Gutter", in Frederick Luis Aldama, ed., *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), x.

the novels, and have gone through the process of researching and proposing three different mo‘olelo so far, but none have gotten past the initial development phase yet. Though the process of creating these comics is nowhere near complete, the stumbling blocks and issues that have arisen do shed some light on the issues that face our community in the quest for ‘onipa‘a.

Many of these issues have arisen because of our unfamiliarity with the production of comics and because we are not sure which paths to follow when deciding exactly what a Hawaiian comic should be, but these choices are what makes the genre so full of possibility. Literary scholar Frederick Luis Aldama points out the almost limitless possibilities facing comics author-artists:

> The process of writing and drawing implies, at each instant, myriad choices (one word instead of another, one image instead of another, one or another style of lettering, etc.); in thinking in images, as with lucid dreaming, the author-artist (or author-and-artist team, as the case may be) is deciding which gaps to leave and which gaps to fill in.[37]

[37] Frederick Luis Aldama, “Multicultural Comics Today: A Brief Introduction”, in Aldama, *Multicultural Comics*, 19.

As I said above, ‘onipa‘a lives in the margins, the everyday, the mundane; in comics, each of the choices, the gaps, margins, and gutters, are what allow our team to create a ‘Hawaiian’ comic, as opposed to one that is just about Hawai‘i.

We are deploying Scott McCloud’s concept of “closure” to fashion a Hawaiian world to which both Hawaiian readers/viewers and the mo‘olelo itself can ‘escape’. Closure is the ability of a person’s mind to “fill in the blanks” between panels, which McCloud says fosters an intimacy between creator and audience.[38] He goes on to describe how comics manipulate the juxtaposition of words and images via a single sense to help create this new sensory world for ourselves: “it is an exclusively visual representation. Within these panels, we can only convey information visually. But between panels, none of our senses are required at all. Which is why all of our senses are engaged!” (89). It is with this concept in mind that we have gone about constructing our Hawaiian world of words and images.

[38] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 69.

The construction of such a ‘Hawaiian’ world is founded on the mo‘olelo themselves, but we are aware that the background and the mundane details are what engage our senses and enable a more intimate connection with the text. Whether the men’s malo, or loincloths, are tied correctly; whether the plants at a character’s feet plausibly grow in the area in which she or he is standing; whether the mountains in the distance actually look like the mountains of that place, all of these details create the world that we want the reader to escape to, though the reader might not actively notice them. Even the accurate visual representation of sound comes into play. Comics cannot convey actual sound but they portray them using the infamous onomatopoeic words: bam, pow, krakoom, etc. Hawaiians, however, represented sounds very differently. For example, the rooster’s ‘cock-a-doodle-doo!’ in English is “o‘o‘o‘ō!’ for Hawaiians. Instead of a cat going ‘meow’, Hawaiian cats say “owau’. The Hawaiian word for ‘boom!’ is ‘kūakā!’

The portrayal of sound may seem like a minor point, but I am convinced that these hardly noticed and mundane details will determine how vivid and in-depth

we can make the reading experience for our audience. Comics can be very immersive and if every aspect of the world we construct is not covered, the 'Hawaiianness' will come across as a mere patina. If the bangs, biffs, pows, and booms are all still in English, it will be clear to the readers that they are still in an English-dominated world built on English-centric thought and sound. But, if we can build a Hawaiian world in which every sensory detail comes from a Hawaiian understanding and where Hawaiian is the main language of thought and expression, we can show our readers how different the world they escaped from could be.

The story we are working on now is about Hina, a beautiful woman, who gives birth to two children: Niheu and Kana. Niheu is a strong yet non-magical boy, while Kana is born as a rope and once he takes human form, he has superhuman strength and the power to stretch. Hina is abducted by Kaupeʻepeʻenuikauila, a charismatic bandit who conducts raids on the other chiefs around him from a nearly impregnable fortress on the island of Molokaʻi. Over the years of her captivity, she begins to fall in love with him because he treats her much better than her husband did. When her two sons are old enough, however, they journey to Molokaʻi to rescue her and fight several monstrous creatures on the way. Kana and Niheu attack Kaupeʻepeʻe's fortress and he allows them to kill him so that Hina can be 'rescued'.

In the same way that the project is bringing the different mana of our team members together, the team is also bringing together eight different mana of the moʻolelo to create our script. The five main texts are from Hawaiian-language sources that were published between 1836 and 1927: "No ko Molokai"[39] by H. R. H.[40] (1836),[41] *He Moolelo no Kana, ka Hanai a Uli* by J. H. Kānepuʻu (1867),[42] *He Moolelo Kaao no Kana* by Niuhelewai (1891),[43] "Kaao no Kana ame Niheu" and "Kaao no Kana ame Moi" by Abraham Fornander (1919),[44] and "Kaao no Kana a me Niheu" by J. K. Mokumaiʻa (1927).[45] To ensure that the Hawaiian moʻolelo are honored, details are only taken from the three extant English-language versions of the story if the team feels that they fit in with a Hawaiian cultural understanding. We are taking care in the initial script and plot outlines to attribute each plot element to its specific source text so that this information can be taken into account when making decisions about which aspects of the different versions to include in the final script.

Though each plot detail will not be attributed in the final text, readers will be directed to the source texts in our paratextual material. We feel these pointers are especially important because of the Hawaiian community's history of literacy. In the Kingdom era, Hawaiian moʻolelo were important as carriers of culture, but also offered entertainment, so nearly every issue of every newspaper included at least one (and as many as four) serial installments of Hawaiian and foreign moʻolelo.[46] Often, a single copy of a newspaper was purchased, read aloud to the entire family, and then passed along from house to house.[47] Moʻolelo were everywhere and known to everyone, yet Hawaiʻi went from being one of the most literate nations in the

[39] These titles come from sources which did not use modern Hawaiian orthography and will thus appear as they were written at the time.

[40] More research needs to be done, but there is some evidence in the body of the story that it is written by someone of royal standing and that H. R. H. stands for "His/Her Royal Highness".

[41] H. R. H., "No ko Molokai", *Ke Kumu Hawaii* (8 June 1836), 2.

[42] J. H. Kanepuu, "He Moolelo no Kana, ka Hanai a Uli", *Ke Au Okoa* (19 December 1867–13 February 1868).

[43] Niuhelewai, "He Moolelo Kaao no Kana", *Ka Leo o ka Lahui* (11 June 1891–19 August 1891).

[44] Abraham Fornander, *Fornander Collection of Hawaiian Antiquities and Folk-Lore* (Bishop Museum Press, 1919) 436–439, 489–491.

[45] J. K. Mokumaia, "Kaao no Kana ame Niheu", *Ka Nupepa Kuokoa* (13 January 1927), 2.

[46] For insight on Hawaiian-language newspapers, see Leilani Basham, "Ka Lāhui Hawaiʻi: He Moʻolelo, He ʻĀina, He Loina and He Ea Kākou", *Hūlili,* 6.1 (2010): 37–72; Nogelmeier, *Mai Paʻa i ka Leo*, 2010; Kuwada, "How Blue *Is* His Beard?", *Marvels & Tales*, 23.1 (2009): 17–39; and Noenoe Silva's work.

[47] M. Puakea Nogelmeier, *Mai Paʻa i ka Leo*, 81.

world in the nineteenth century[48] to ranking thirty-ninth nationally in USA reading statistics in 1998, with Hawaiian students at the bottom of that group.[49]

One of the simplest reasons for this low literacy, at least judging by the mainly Hawaiian students who enroll in my Hawaiian Literature classes at the University of Hawai'i, is that they have been conditioned to not care about reading, or at least the kind of reading that they do for school. As mentioned earlier, a lot of books aim at telling mo'olelo or passing on cultural lessons to young children, but there is almost nothing Hawaiian, or even Hawai'i-based, after that to appeal to them as they grow into teenagers and adults. A great many of my students state quite emphatically that they don't like to read, and yet they go on to enjoy, and often love, reading the Hawaiian stories we go over in class. In fact, when pressed, they admit to really liking to read things like manga and Harry Potter, but none of those things are considered 'real' reading. It seems quite obvious that for most of them, being forced in school to read literature by people they feel no connection to, that neither engages nor entertains them, does not lead to a love for the act of reading. It just presents reading as another thing that is 'not for them'.

Basing these comics on authored Hawaiian mo'olelo from the Hawaiian-language newspapers, then, is meant to point readers to the source mo'olelo through explicit mention in the paratexts and show these young Hawaiians that there are stories out there 'for them'. If they seek out these mo'olelo, they might possibly become interested in interacting with other Hawaiian forms, whether they be books, newspapers, songs, dances, etc., and perhaps mo'olelo like these comics can even invite Hawaiian youth (and those of us who feel young at heart) to enjoy reading again. One problem with having this aim, though, is that we do not want to strip all of the fun from comics and make them into something with an explicit and heavy-handed message. Nothing is less innocuous than an 'educational', message-driven comic that smacks of assigned reading and discussion questions. In an interview with reporter Sarah Henning, Ishmael Hope, a Juneau storyteller and the writer of the Tlingit comic *Strong Man,* said: "If I started with the perspective 'Oh, I want to do something positive with morals that gives a good Alaska Native message', it would be an afterschool special ... It would be one of those lame things that I never, ever liked when I was a kid".[50] Like Hope, we are aware that even though we have a definite cultural and social agenda with the publication of these graphic novels, we must be very careful to balance our desire to give mana to our mo'olelo with the desire to make an engaging and entertaining comic.

Conclusion

As Hawaiians continue to struggle for sovereignty, we must remember that each breath a storyteller shares with a mo'olelo gives mana to that story and those who experience it. We grow as a people every time one of our stories is recovered from the Hawaiian-language newspapers, gets read at the beach, or is told among friends. Thus, we must breathe not only our mana, but our possibilities into these mo'olelo,

[48] See Laura Fish Judd, *Honolulu, Sketches of the Life: Social, Political and Religious in the Hawaiian Islands from 1828-1861* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Company, 1880), 79; Albertine Loomis and A. Grove Day, *Ka Pa'i Palapala: Early Printing in Hawai'i* (Honolulu: Mission Houses Museum, 1997), 31.

[49] Native Hawaiian Education Act. Pub. L 107-110. Sec. 7201-7207. 1 July 2002.

[50] Sarah Henning, "Alaska Comic Superhero", *Anchorage Daily News* (16 Feb 2007), *website*, <http://www.adn.com>, 25 November 2008.

and give the readers and listeners a chance to see not only what has been, but also what could be.

By combining the mundane with the insistent, the marginal with the survivant, comics such as the ones I have discussed are meant to be gateways of sorts that would simultaneously allow readers to seek out new mo'olelo or demand that they be made more accessible and in various forms. Those who enter these gateways would be invited to escape, while still participating in 'onipa'a. Therefore, with the publication of seemingly innocuous and escapist Hawaiian mo'olelo in comics form, readers will have a chance to experience (and perhaps create) worlds where things Hawaiian are mundane yet full of mana, story worlds and places where cultural values and messages do not stand out. Not because they are not important, but because they are *everywhere*.