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## *Nahenahe:* The Sound of Kanaka Maoli Refusal

*Kevin Fellezs*

*Nahenahe* is the Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) term for “soft, sweet, melodious,” and is the term most often used to describe the aesthetic ideal for Hawaiian slack key guitar, or *kī hōʻalu*, a Hawaiian fingerpicking open-tuning acoustic guitar tradition, with roots in the *paniolo* (Hawaiian cowboy) ranch culture of nineteenth century Hawai‘i.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I challenge the stereotyping of softness as acquiescence or worse, cowardice, sweetness as weakness or naiveté, and melodiousness as the sound of the tritely familiar or perfunctorily conventional. Hawaiian music’s central *nahenahe* aesthetic is often overdetermined as *merely* soft and gentle, incapable of expressing force or registering gravitas. How might Hawaiian slack key guitar or Hawaiian musicking more broadly be heard as offering alternatives

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<sup>1</sup> The literal translation for *kanaka maoli* is “true people,” but is used to indicate “Native Hawaiian.” All Hawaiian definitions are taken from Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary: Hawaiian-English, English-Hawaiian*, rev. and enlarged edn. (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1986).

to conventional notions of the ways in which music signifies action, agency, and authority? How might Hawaiian musicians perform “native refusal,” a concept borrowed from Audra Simpson meant to designate the Native Hawaiian “refusal” of settler colonialist logics, including white supremacy and racism?<sup>2</sup> I understand settler colonialism in Hawai‘i as mobilizing racist policies since the nineteenth century in order to lay claim to Hawaiian territory, dispossessing Native Hawaiians, while using Hawaiian culture to promote the colonialist project as a benign effort. In a decolonizing move, I focus on the ways in which the *nahenahe* aesthetic catalyzes a soft and gentle yet powerful, forceful sounding presence in antiracist struggles.

Hawaiian slack key guitarists aim for *nahenahe*, seeking a balance between delicacy and flexibility. *Nahenahe* is the affective register deeply connected to the particular *‘āina* (land, earth) of a song, usually signaled in its *mo‘olelo* (story, history) and discovered through its relationship to the *‘ohana* (family) with the *kuleana* (responsibility) to preserve and perform it. Part of that attention to geographical particularity is the result of slack key’s “disappearance” during the Hawaiian Kingdom (1795–1898) and US Territorial (1898–1959) periods in which slack key moved “underground” as Hawaiian culture was suppressed by white New England missionaries and US American businessmen ensconced in the political life of the Hawaiian Kingdom as advisors and legislators.<sup>3</sup> The tradition was kept alive by *‘ohana* jealously guarding tunings and repertoire though this almost led to its disappearance by the late 1960s (there are still *‘ohana* songs,

2 Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

3 The years 1893–98 were years in which politicians such as Sanford Dole and Lorrin A. Thorston, emerging from the *haole* sugarcane oligarchy (largely built from the ranks of New England Protestant missionaries and their descendants), worked to annex the Kingdom of Hawai‘i through state-like entities they controlled, the Provisional Government of Hawai‘i (1893–94) and the Republic of Hawai‘i (1894–98). In 1898, they forcibly overthrew the Hawaiian Kingdom with the support of US military, entering the US Territorial period.

performed only at informal family gatherings, unrecorded and uncirculated beyond such gatherings).

If slack key's power — affective, proactive, effective — comes from the way that it *sounds*, then what is the *sound* of slack key? To answer, I will begin with a short discussion of the *nahenahe* aesthetic and its relationship to the *kī hōʻalu* tradition, focusing on the Hawaiian slack key guitar because of its role in the Hawaiian Renaissance period (1964-1980), a time when young people in Hawai'i revived traditional Hawaiian arts, crafts, and language use, largely by re-connecting to an older generation of Native Hawaiian artists and artisans.<sup>4</sup> I then turn to musician and activist George Helm as a way to think about Native Hawaiian cosmological understandings of human relations with the *ʻāina*, which is an agentive force, not a commodity or property subject to human domination. I conclude with a meditation on the ways in which soft music such as Hawaiian slack key guitar sounds out against racism by challenging the assumption that difference is always marked as threatening or antagonistic. Slack key offers the possibility of resisting racism by welcoming collaboration as an alternative to meeting difference with a desire for dominance or extermination.

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Softness in musicking is doubly marked as sweet, gentle, serene, often associated with spirituality or solemnity, and just as often, with silence or silences. Soft has been a term used to describe genres and styles as varied as ambient, downtempo, chill, bossa nova, smooth jazz, new age, easy listening, MOR (middle of the road), soft rock, psychedelia, singer-songwriter, and folk/folk rock. The category, soft rock, was a marketing term used in

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4 I date the Hawaiian Renaissance beginning with the publication of John Dominis Holt's *On Being Hawaiian* in 1964 and ending with Gabby Pahinui's death in 1980, although most of the activities associated with the Renaissance occurred in the 1970s. This period is sometimes referred to as the "Second Hawaiian Renaissance" in recognition of the "First Hawaiian Renaissance" initiated by Mō'i David Kalākaua (1836-1891).

the 1970s to mark the merging of pop, folk, and rock with the former two terms modulating the latter — in distinction to the more aggressive sounds of contemporaneous “hard” rock. Soft rock musicians’ apolitical stance was allegedly signaled by their introspection and focus on personal expression, rather than more social concerns.<sup>5</sup> Art music categories such as minimalism as well as liturgical or religious music from medieval Gregorian chant to Zen monks’ *honkyoku* (shakuhachi or vertical bamboo flute music) have all been perceived, described, or marketed in terms synonymous with soft.

Music produced by ensembles as varied as the Necks, Kafka’s Ibiki, and the Philip Glass Ensemble has been described as soft, consonant, and static, the latter quality further delinking activity from the soft. Individuals as different in aesthetic approach from one another as Pauline Oliveros, Bon Iver, Stefan Micus, Brian Eno, and Enya produce musicking categorized and represented in terms synonymous with softness, gentleness, and the ethereal. The category, women’s music, which gained widespread use when the record label, Olivia, began producing recordings of artists such as Meg Christian in the 1970s, was described as soft despite the musicians’ protestations in their music of gender and sexual norms (and could be used to argue for the effectiveness of soft music in progressive movements, as well). Due to the gendering of softness as female — and therefore associated with being weak and emotional — the music of female artists as varied as Janis Ian, Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Laura Nyro, Rhiannon Giddens, Valerie June, Sarah McLachlan, and Sade are often described as soft, personal, intimate. Soft is one of the

5 For example, Stephen Holden, in his *Oxford Music Online* entry (<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.49243>), defines soft rock as “A term invented in the early 1970s to describe acoustic folk-rock and other tuneful, soothing types of popular music that use electric instruments. James Taylor, Neil Young (the early recordings), and Cat Stevens typify the folk element in soft rock; in Los Angeles the pop-rock groups Bread and the Carpenters made polished, soft-rock recordings that the music industry designated ‘middle of the road’. *The term is now applied broadly to quieter popular music of all sorts that uses mild rock rhythms and some electric instruments in songs of the ballad type*” (emphasis added).

textures of “indigenous” musical signification throughout new age and the retro-lounge-exotica music genres, especially in the attempts to evoke a misty-eyed view of extinct tribes, lost in prelapsarian fantasies of innocent savages “dwelling in nature” and, in the case of Hawaiians, evoking a gentle, indolent people blessed with a childlike innocence, even at their most lascivious. The links between the feminine and the native are many: both are emotional rather than intellectual, weak rather than virile, naïve rather than worldly, soft rather than hard.

I freely concede the point that soft and its adjectival cousins are not the only terms used to categorize the entirety of these various musickings, and that the distinct terms not shared by the generic markers or individual artists I list above may have more significance than any shared (or similar) traits predicated on an idea of musical softness. Rather, I use softness as a keyword to tease out the ways softness and corollary terms such as smooth, sweet, and gentle articulate social relations in which norms are not merely inverted but are subverted, even perverted. I am writing my essay in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election in which racism and white supremacy was an explicit part of Donald Trump’s appeal. I seek to reconsider the ways in which the soft, gentle musicking of Native Hawaiians prefigure and sound out social relations antithetical to the racist logics invoked in Trump’s campaign, countering with the soft and gentle sounds of *kī hō‘alu*, which, importantly, stake these political claims in Kanaka Maoli rather than Eurocentric terms.

Listening to Hawaiian music as an agentive soft music enables us to hear guitarist George Helm use a performance of Hawaiian standard, “Hi‘ilawe,” to fuel Kanaka Maoli opposition to the continued denigration and commercial appropriation of their culture, a foundational slab in the construction of the US militourism industrial complex in Hawai‘i.<sup>6</sup> The militourism

6 Kathy E. Ferguson and Phyllis Turnbull, *Oh, Say, Can You See? The Semiotics of the Military in Hawai‘i* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999); Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez, *Securing Paradise: Tourism and Militarism in Hawai‘i and the Philippines* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Kyle Kajihira, “The Militarizing of Hawai‘i: Occupation, Accommodation,

industrial complex rests on an ideological base of colonialism aided and abetted by white supremacy and articulated through settlers, a conjuncture brought into high relief as Japanese Americans assumed political and business control of Hawai'i politics and trade in the 1950s.<sup>7</sup>

Partner to the tourist industry's interest in representing Hawai'i as a paradiscal escape from modernity, sociologists such as Robert Park championed Hawai'i's mixed-race population as the perfect case example of American multiculturalism *avant la lettre*.<sup>8</sup> Park argued that the racial and ethnic mixture of Hawai'i resulted in a tolerance for difference and a model for American assimilationist ideals, an idea that was used to promote Hawai'i statehood. Yet underlying those idyllic conditions Park describes is the illegal US takeover of Hawai'i in 1893, as Manifest Destiny spread across the Pacific. The interests of US capitalists in Hawai'i were standing, *haole* annexationists argued, on the sanctioned foundation of American democracy, capitalism, and (Protestant) Christianity, which they coupled to their construction of Native Hawaiians as a naturally affectionate and welcoming people, allowing for a blossoming of mixed race social harmony to prevail. As I suggest, however, this view ignored Native Hawaiian genocide and land dispossession and the dire circumstances faced by labor immigrants induced in part by the political and economic motives of *haole* landowners.

A final preliminary note: Hawaiian music in its most commercial and available forms was early associated with musical kitsch, an "ethnic" novelty music for early twentieth century popular music audiences. Since the post-Territorial period (1898–1959) and the rise of the militourism industrial complex in Hawai'i, the music industry in Hawai'i has focused on pro-

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and Resistance," in *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai'i*, eds. Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 170–94.

7 *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai'i*, eds. Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 170–94.

8 Robert Park, *Race and Culture* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1950).

ducing music for tourists rather than the much smaller local market.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Lisa Kaheleole Hall notes:

The kitschy transformation of Hawaiians and Hawaiian culture [means] that unlike other stigmatized groups in the United States, Hawaiians are not feared, even though, with our warrior history, our popular image could easily have been different. Instead, our friendliness has been a major selling point for the tourist industry for more than a century, possibly because the death toll from colonization was so one-sided.<sup>10</sup>

The tourism industry promotes an image of Native Hawaiians as always welcoming, their aloha spirit imbuing them with an innate hospitality and generosity that ignores a long history of Native Hawaiians battling non-Hawaiian encroachment in the islands in conventional ways.<sup>11</sup> But as Hall suggests, the legacy of Hawaiian warriors has been long forgotten, replaced by the laconic yet hypersexualized beach boy and *hula* maiden who embrace all *malihini* (strangers) into their welcoming arms. The gruesome cannibals of Cook's apotheosis have long been softened by the feminization of Hawaiian culture as it has been transfigured into the inviting brown *hula* maiden.<sup>12</sup>

Both the fearsome Kanaka Maoli warrior and the rough riding *paniolo* of slack key lore have largely disappeared from his-

9 Similar to music markets everywhere, with the rise of digital downloading, the local music industry has had to re-define its role; however, the tourist trade remains the primary market for the music industry in Hawai'i. Elizabeth Tatar, *Strains of Change: The Impact of Tourism on Hawaiian Music* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 2012).

10 Lisa Kaheleole Hall, "Hawaiian at Heart' and Other Fictions," *Contemporary Pacific* 17, no. 2 (2005): 404–13, at 409, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2005.0051>.

11 Noenoe K. Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*, 2nd edn. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).

12 Elizabeth Buck, *Paradise Remade: The Politics of Culture and History in Hawai'i* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Heather A. Diamond, *American Aloha: Cultural Tourism and the Negotiation of Tradition* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).



torical memory and popular representation. Yet even in warfare, Kanaka Maoli modeled a distinct way of staging conflict. An annual period, observed from October through March, known as *Makahiki*, was a time of spiritual renewal and celebration of the harvest in which war was outlawed. This lull in warfare allowed the *ali'i* (chiefs) to circuit their islands to receive tribute as well as participate in various festivities and activities such as hula and surfing.<sup>13</sup>

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Hawaiian music of any style rarely registers as abrasive even to non-Hawaiian ears unfamiliar with the music. Innocuous, pleasant, even simple perhaps, but it would take a highly contrary pair of ears to find slack key guitar, for example, “noisy” or “disturbing.” In contrast, I want to suggest that slack key guitar’s *nahenahe* sound is oppositional precisely because it offers an alternative to settler colonialist logics by softly announcing its presence, quietly opposing the racialized hierarchies articulated in social relations in which *haole* and Local (non-Hawaiian, non-*haole* residents), particularly Japanese Americans, dominate Hawaiian social and political life.

Can we hear *nahenahe* as a Hawaiian call for strategies of beauty and gentleness voiced from within a general cultural tendency toward inclusion sustained by a reciprocal set of obligations? Conversely, can we argue that in the contemporary metropolitan soundscape, *noise* is non-threatening, quotidian, even banal?<sup>14</sup> Noise or noisy music as the sound of the “shock of the new” is anything but, with noise reiterating a now-barely registered buzz, oblivious to its own complacency and reactionary

13 Kame‘eleihiwa Lilikalā, *Native Land and Foreign Desires: Pehea La E Pono Ai?* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1992); Patrick V. Kirch, *Shark Going Inland Is My Chief: The Island Civilization of Ancient Hawai‘i* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

14 Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

position.<sup>15</sup> Noise just as readily reproduces forms of dominance and power as of resistance and opposition, its sounding out just as often reactionary as progressive.<sup>16</sup>

By contrast, *nahenahe* offers listeners alternatives rather than excesses, gently persuasive rather than aggressively argumentative. I do not wish to be misunderstood: There is a place for both noise artist Merzbow (né Akita Masami) and Hawaiian slack key guitarist Charles Philip “Gabby” Pahinui. More pointedly for this essay, Merzbow’s animal rights activism is the sort of visible political action comparable to George Helm’s activities, which I discuss below (to be clear: Helm is not recognized as a slack key guitarist). Sonically, Hawaiian musicians are invested in a *nahenahe* aesthetic and are uninterested in wielding power by dominating a listener with decibels and velocity. Rather, the *nahenahe* aesthetic invites listeners to explore compassionate, dialogical possibilities through its merging of six voices — each individual string of the guitar an independent part within a larger harmonious ensemble — into a family, or *‘ohana*, of resonating bodies in sync yet independent, sounding out the nature of open tunings.

Open tunings, as the name suggests, allow for the strings to reverberate harmoniously when struck together without fretting, unlike standard tuning. We might also think of open tuning as free, liberated, uninhibited, yet amicable, consonant, empathetic. It is not without its tensions — slack key guitar does not simply offer anodyne sonic pabulum for it emerged from the agonistic world of the rural Hawaiian, unlikely to be swaddled in anaesthetizing material comfort despite over a century of iconography displaying languid Hawaiian natives. These native lives of material ease are used to convince us of Hawaiians’

15 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997); Barry Shank, *Political Force of Musical Beauty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

16 Susan Fast and Kip Pegley, eds., *Music, Politics, and Violence* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2012); *Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence*, eds. Bruce Johnson, Martin Cloonan, and Derek B. Scott (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013).

unconditional love, a simple but good-hearted people with a preternatural proclivity for musicking.

*Nahenahe* is not a romantic return to Nature or “the folk,” that space of unsullied *communitas* often ascribed to rural folk music. While slack key may have its origins as a rural music, formed in the hardscrabble ranch culture of nineteenth century Hawai‘i, the music is anything but roughhewn.<sup>17</sup> It is a uniquely Hawaiian blend of Spanish instrumentation, Protestant hymnody, and Native Hawaiian rhythmic and melodic sensibilities enfolded within an oral culture that extensively employed *kaona*, or hidden meanings, in song texts. Slack key’s early history is obscured by its oral transmission and folk practice, meaning, the music circulated largely outside the circuits of the Hawaiian music industry with little of a popular audience outside of the islands and provoking little interest from scholars. Hawaiian music enjoyed a brief period of interest for continental us popular music audiences in the first decade of the twentieth century. By the second and third decades, Hawaiian music was a popular music genre little to do with traditional Hawaiian musicking, which was assumed to have largely passed away, leaving *hapa haole* (literally, half foreigner<sup>18</sup>) to represent Hawaiian music to

17 There is a form of music distinct from slack key guitar that emerged from the Hawaiian ranch culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth century termed “*paniolo* music,” which sounds very similar to the contemporaneous “cowboy songs” of North America.

18 *Hapa haole* is literally “half foreigner,” but is used to categorize Hawaiian-themed popular music that is based on continental us popular music forms. As noted in the text, since most of this music was composed in the early twentieth century in attempts to cash in on the Hawaiian craze of the time, the songs follow vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley forms rather than traditional Hawaiian *mele* (chant) or hula forms. For a more detailed investigation of the *hapa haole* song phenomenon, see Charles Hiroshi Garrett, “Sounds of Paradise: Hawai‘i and the American Musical Imagination,” in *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 165–214; Elizabeth Buck, *Paradise Remade: The Politics of Culture and History in Hawai‘i* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); and George Kanahele, “Hapa Haole Songs,” in *Hawaiian Music and Musicians: An Encyclopedic History*, rev. ed., eds. John Berger and Joanna Kanahele (Honolulu: Mutual Publishing,

non-Hawaiian audiences. Eventually, *hapa haole* gained enough historical patina to enjoy a kind of survivor's victory.<sup>19</sup>

In any case, slack key guitar does not *sound* like conventional ideas regarding the ways in which protest or opposition *should* sound. *Nahenahe* is offered up by guitarists to describe slack key so often that it has become a cliché of interviews and artist profiles. Like any generalization, one easily finds counterexamples: Sonny Chillingworth's virtuosic "Whee Ha Swing," which is a showcase tune for slack key artists to display their chops (technical skills); Keola Beamer's neoclassical arrangement of "Hi'ilawe"; or Ozzie Kotani's studied arrangements of Queen Lili'uokalani's music on his 2002 recording, *To Honor A Queen (E Ho'ohiwahiwa I Ka Mo'i Wahine)*. These counterexamples reflect other facets of slack key, however. "Whee Ha Swing" is a tour de force that portrays the exuberant *paniolo* ranch culture and slack key's resonance with bluegrass and other country and western repertoires that emphasize rural virtuosity with its competitive macho sensibilities (think, rodeos) that is both good-natured and evidence of difficult "hard country" lives.<sup>20</sup> Beamer and Kotani, on the other hand, give notice to slack key's inherent aesthetic value in terms more widely held in the broader musical world external to Hawai'i. Granted, these counterexamples do not register as "oppositional" or "resistance music" to most ears any more than the standard, "Hi'ilawe," though I want to continue to suggest that *nahenahe* is an aesthetic resistant to dominant understandings of musical value and beauty *because*

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2012). For a study that recuperates *hapa haole* song from its critics, though with important qualifications, see Akio Yamashiro, "Ethics in Song: Becoming Kama'āina in Hapa-Haole Music," in *Cultural Analysis* 8 (2009): 1–23; [https://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~culturalanalysis/volume8/vol8\\_article1.html](https://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~culturalanalysis/volume8/vol8_article1.html).

19 For reasons of space, I am less concerned with this larger history of Hawaiian music here.

20 Aaron Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). While not a slack key song and therefore outside the scope of this study, George Helms's version of "Hawaiian Cowboy" with his virtuosic yodeling, conjure another ready comparison between Hawaiian and western us "cowboy" music.

it offers a vision of the world which privileges gentleness, empathetic interpersonal interaction, and representational modesty.

*Nahenahe* remains the core aesthetic, counterexamples notwithstanding, and it is easy to hear the sweet, gentle quality in a majority of recordings and performances. There are other remarkable acoustic guitar traditions such as *flamenco*, some forms of the blues, the Celtic traditions of the British Isles and France, the guitar traditions of the South Asian Sub-Continent.<sup>21</sup> These guitar cultures are conceived as acoustic guitar traditions hardwired to specific communities, and though, for instance, the blues and other folk guitar traditions share a number of identical open tunings with slack key, any similarities among the guitar traditions fall away before *nahenahe*. By comparison, the unhurried tempos of slack key accentuate the tradition's gentle rhythmic pulse in contrast to the blues or *flamenco*. Where Hawaiian rhythms are supple, the blues and country music offer more energetic rhythmic pulses built for dances quite distinct from *hula*. These guitar traditions are often entangled in notions of the dangerous yet erotically appealing subaltern; slack key music, unlike most traditions, offers a far gentler seduction with its promise of an erotics of languid pleasure, if wrapped in similarly primitivistic cloth.

Living within an oral culture, Hawaiians accept that words convey more than they denote, and that multiple meanings and interpretations accompany any spoken word. Words are also spoken through the *ea* or breath, an important spiritual concept for Kanaka Maoli, giving spoken words an importance beyond surface meanings. Correspondingly, Hawaiians are often circumspect in their verbal communication and direct confrontation is often avoided. It is one reason *kaona* is so widely practiced. Traditional Hawaiian pedagogy, especially for slack key, entails a "no questions" attitude by *kumu* (teachers). The

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21 There is no space here, even restricting ourselves to presenting a list, to be anything near comprehensive, but there are innumerable string instrument traditions, including those of the oud, banjo, quattro, tiple, shamisen, koto, sitar, violin, cello, gambola, and of course, "classical" guitar.

us American disposition to “speak one’s mind” is at odds with Kanaka Maoli understandings of communication in which the unspoken saturates every conversation with meaning beyond the merely verbal.

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But sometimes candor is precisely the order of the day despite the possibility of confrontation. The Hawaiian Renaissance (1964–80) was a time in which “a movement spearheaded by a new form of Hawaiian music that was, at the same time, emergent in its ideological implications, residual in its ties to traditional forms, and oppositional in its challenges to the political, social, and cultural assumptions of the dominant mainland-created ideology,” energizing young Hawai‘i musicians, activists, artists, and hula dancers in efforts of Hawaiian cultural preservation, innovation, and legitimation and slack key was part of the musical sound of the era with Gabby Pahinui, Atta Isaacs, and Peter Moon.<sup>22</sup> Groups such as the Sunday Manoa, Hui Ohana, and the Makaha Sons of Nī‘ihau were formed by young Hawaiian musicians looking to older traditional Hawaiian music for sources and inspiration while updating those traditions and songs by mixing in elements from contemporary popular music. As George Lewis points out, even the band names reflect a turn away from the types of group names then dominant such as the Hawaiian Surfers, the Maile Serenaders, or the Waikiki Beachboys in order to emphasize a number of political stances emergent at the time: The importance of place and the ‘āina and the use of the Hawaiian language.<sup>23</sup>

22 George H. Lewis, “Style in Revolt: Music, Social Protest, and the Hawaiian Cultural Renaissance,” *International Social Science Review* 62, no. 4 (1987): 168–77, at 172, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/i40088381>; George Hu‘eu Sanford Kanahele, “Hawaiian Renaissance Grips, Changes Island History,” *Ha‘ilono Mele* 5, no. 7 (1979): 1–9.

23 For a critical assessment of these musicians’ Hawaiian language use, see Amy Ku‘uleialoha Stillman, “Young Composers Have Trouble with Hawaiian,” *Ha‘ilono Mele* 4, no. 7 (1978): 6–7.

Along with the renewed interest in *hula kahiko* (ancient *hula*), *oli* (chant without dance), use of Hawaiian instruments such as the *‘ulili* (gourd rattles), *‘uli‘uli* (gourd or shell rattles), and the *ipu* (gourd drum), slack key signified traditional Kanaka Maoli culture, emerging from the protected enclaves of once-secretive *‘ohana*. Keola Beamer’s 1973 publication of the first slack key method book coincided with the era’s resuscitation of traditional Hawaiian culture. Given Gabby Pahinui’s stature in the Renaissance period, there was renewed interest in slack key, reflected in his invited participation in the Hawaii Music Foundation’s first fundraising concert in 1972, which was also Hawai‘i’s first concert devoted exclusively to slack key.

Younger musicians followed the template laid down by a group formed in the early 1960s by Gabby Pahinui and *‘uku-lele* virtuoso Eddie Kamae named the Sons of Hawaii, which openly incorporated contemporary forms of popular music and state-of-the-art record production techniques with traditional repertoire while singing in the Hawaiian language and grafting popular music elements with an ear tilted toward traditional Hawaiian aesthetics and concerns. Even when composing original music using rock as its main musical referent, the use of the Hawaiian language by Renaissance-era bands signaled a turn away from the tourist trade. The focus was on solidifying Hawaiian cultural norms and establishing solidarity or, in Hawaiian terms, re-establishing the *‘ohana*.

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The link between Hawaiian music and Hawaiian political activism can be most clearly drawn in the life of George Helm. A *leo ki‘e ki‘e* (falsetto) singer and guitarist, Helm helped form the Protect Kaho‘olawe ‘Ohana (PKO), a group of young Hawai‘i activists dedicated to reclaiming the island of Kaho‘olawe from the US Navy, which had been using the island for live ordinance exercises, including missile testing, beginning in 1941. PKO was inspired by a group called the Aboriginal Lands of Hawaiian

Ancestry or ALOHA, formed to reclaim territory for Hawaiians.<sup>24</sup> Helm, along with Kimo Mitchell, hoped to get arrested when they attempted to land on Kahoʻolawe, an illegal act at the time, as a way to draw media attention to the issue.<sup>25</sup> Helm was a key figure in articulating *aloha ʻāina* (love of the land) as a foundational concept in the Hawaiian sovereignty movement before his untimely death in 1977.

The only extant recordings of Helm performing music are culled from live performances in 1976 at the Gold Coin, a restaurant where Helm held a regular gig, released posthumously the following year on two separate recordings by the venue's owner, Richard Wong. Originally planned as nothing more than private recordings without any intention to release them publicly, the recordings contain a number of anomalies. For example, many tracks begin after the start of the song or end before the song has finished. However, Wong managed to capture some of Helms's song introductions in which he describes the history of a song's composition or the meaning of the lyrics — the songs' *moʻolelo* — revealing the depth of his knowledge and concern for Hawai'i even when entertaining diners at a restaurant. Remembered today more for his activism than his musicking, it is fitting that the only surviving record of his expressive *leo kiʻe kiʻe* vocals and dexterous fretboard fingerwork also presents him as a politically conscious Native Hawaiian.

However, the Renaissance was not welcomed by everyone in the Native Hawaiian community, with some viewing activists such as George Helm, Walter Ritte, Bumpy Kanahele, and others as either individuals more interested in self-promotion than in solving the dire material conditions faced by the Kanaka Maoli community or upstart rabble rousers without a clear agenda or plan beyond "making trouble." At the time, Helms and Walter Ritte's occupation of Kahoʻolawe was initially op-

24 Norman Meller and Ann Feder Lee, "Hawaiian Sovereignty," *Publius* 27, no. 2 (1997): 167–85, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.pubjof.a029904>.

25 *Ho'iho'i Hou: A Tribute to George Helm and Kimo Mitchell*, ed. Rob Morales (Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge, 1984).



posed by the Hawaiian Civic Clubs, which had taken out ads against the PKO actions (the members of the Clubs would eventually change their minds and support the PKO and the ideology of *aloha ʻāina*).<sup>26</sup> Hiʻilawe, the waterfalls, seemed to be receding even as “Hiʻilawe,” the song, became a prominent standard among young slack key artists.

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On 3 January 1976, Helm along with eight others, organized a landing on the island. Arrested almost immediately after they landed, PKO was organized to begin reclamation of the island and to stop the Navy missile testing, arguing that the island was sacred to Kanaka Maoli. The Navy finally relented and allowed for a small party of Hawaiians, including Helm, to perform religious rites on the island on 13 February 1976. Helm disappeared, along with fellow activist Kimo Mitchell, on 7 March 1977 in a failed attempt to land on Kahoʻolawe for a third time, but his catalytic work in shaping the PKO and his public advocacy for the reclamation of Hawaiian lands renewed Kanaka Maoli attempts to regain political and territorial sovereignty.

Helm observed the softness of Hawaiian protest, declaring:

Hawaiian music reflects the attitudes toward life and nature. *These are basically clean protests and not harsh*, for example, “Kaulana Nā Pua,” but with a deep hidden meaning. Unfortunately, modern Anglo-Saxon reasoning cannot truly appreciate the deep meaning of a song such as “Kualana Nā Pua.” Many of the Hawaiian songs that are now openly played were once hidden from those who were not of the culture. Many of the songs now openly express, if one understands the words, the language — pain revolution; it’s expressing the emotional

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26 George H. Lewis, “The Role of Music in Popular Social Movements: A Theory and Case Study of the Island State of Hawaii, USA,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 16, no. 2 (1985): 153–62, at 157, <https://doi.org/10.2307/836774>.

reaction the Hawaiians are feeling to the subversion of their life style. *It's an immediacy of feeling.*<sup>27</sup>

Critical of both the Bishop Museum's "mummification" of Hawaiian culture and the Polynesian Cultural Center's "commercial preservation," Helm called for a vibrant, living Hawaiian cultural revolution, emphasizing the spiritual outlook of *aloha ʻāina*, a concept rooted in Native Hawaiian cosmology in which the *ʻāina* is a living entity as a source of human life. Helm is also referencing *kaona* here — "if one understands the words" — as a means of bridging musical and political meanings to an "immediacy of feeling."

Toward the end of the documentary film, *Kahoʻōlawe Aloha ʻĀina* — George Helm (dir. Pahipau and Joan Lander, 1977), Helm defends the notion of *aloha ʻāina* against those characterizations at a public rally in front of the ʻIolani Palace, declaring:

It's very important that we get together. We got to shed off a lot of the images that have been thrown on top of us by newspapers, by television. We just want one thing to talk to you folks about. This is a seed, today, of a new revolution. And we not talking about da kine like the Pilgrims came ova' heah and run away from England, go wipe out the Indians, y'know, and call this America and celebrate two hundred years with firecrackers. *The kind of revolution we're talking about is one of consciousness* — the consciousness, awareness, facts, figures. And like Walter [Ritte] said, "We're going to the ʻIolani Palace to make *hoʻo pupū* [make a stand with] to our *kupuna* [ancestors], yeah? Our *aliʻi*. We hope to put somebody back in deah. We serious! We gotta think this way, we gotta talk that way because that's the only facts that allow for change. And change is synonymous to revolution. And revo-

27 Kimo Turner, "George Helm and the 'Language—Pain Revolution,'" *Haʻilono Mele* 2, no. 6 (1976): 2–3, at 3 (emphasis added). Cf. Amy Kuʻuleialoha Stillman, "'Aloha Aina': New Perspectives on 'Kaulana Nā Pua,'" *Hawaiian Journal of History* 33 (1999): 83–99.

lution comes from the word, revolving, turning in and out so that you have something better, better to live with. And we say again, we want to get rid of that image — radicals — we don't know what that word means but I know a lot of people get turned off by us. Not giving us a chance. You know, we not getting our kicks doing this. This is the beginning. After this, *pau* [finish]! We're going down to something else. What we're looking for is the truth. The truth, the truth, the truth, the truth. *Aloha nō*.

Disavowing the image of the radical, Helm argues that the truth is on the side of the Native Hawaiians. After two centuries of settler-colonialism, Helm argued that Hawaiians needed a change of consciousness — a change in thinking and feeling, a transformation of ideological and instinctual reflexes.

After his impassioned speech, Helm and some of his compatriots begin singing “Hawai‘i Aloha.” If this were to occur today, the audience would begin to hold hands and sing along, perhaps swinging their arms in unison rhythm with the singing. However, even at the height of the Hawaiian Renaissance, only a handful of people seem to be singing along and no one is holding hands. Most of the audience stand motionless, merely listening. Thirty years later, in a 2007 YouTube video of Iz (Israel Kamakawiwo‘ole) performing the song, the audience — young, old, men, women, children, *tūtū* (elders) — quickly jump to their feet, form a human chain of linked hands, and sing along with the star, gently swaying to the rhythm (I have been a part of countless Hawaiian music performances which end this way). The difference in reception and the performance of *‘ohana* in the latter version speak to the impact of the Renaissance. The effects would take some time to ripple out but as the 1980s saw an increase in Japanese and other non-Hawaiian investment in resort developments and increasing numbers of tourists, Hawaiian activists and their sympathizers renewed efforts to highlight

Hawaiian territorial rights into the set of issues covered by the term, the Hawaiian sovereignty movement.<sup>28</sup>

Scholars such as Joyce Linnekin critique such constructions as *aloha ʻāina* as inventions, convenient truths that subordinate groups formulate in response to their debased condition.<sup>29</sup> However, the hegemon's construction of superiority and moral rectitude is also deeply rooted in invention. In other words, both are constructing rationales, defenses, and covers for either the maintenance or the usurpation of the status quo. Again, it is the *mo'olelo* that inform slack key songs with its revolutionary, decolonizing sensibilities. The *nahenahe* sounds of slack key, similar to lyrical *kaona*, especially in a time when noise or direct lyrics are conventionally thought to convey protest, subvert our modern understanding of oppositional or "protest music."<sup>30</sup>

Helm performed repertoire we might readily call traditional Hawaiian folk song but many of his most enthusiastic performances are of *hapa haole* songs. Helm notes in this essay's opening epigraph that the value of musicking is in its ability to catalyze individuals into collective action, and his song selections indicate a similarly non-dogmatic open-eared approach to Hawaiian song. Still, despite being a folk hero of the Hawaiian

28 Lilikalā Kameʻeleihiwa, "Preface: The Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement," in *Islands in Captivity: The Record of the International Tribunal on the Rights of Native Hawaiians*, eds. Ward Churchill and Sharon H. Venne, Hawaiian language edn. (Cambridge: South End, 2004), xvii–xxvii; Lewis, "Style in Revolt."

29 Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, "Tradition, Genuine or Spurious," *Journal of American Folklore* 97, no. 385 (1984): 273–90, <https://doi.org/10.2307/540610>; Jocelyn S. Linnekin, "Cultural Invention and the Dilemma of Authenticity," *American Anthropologist* 93, no. 2 (1991): 446–49, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1991.93.2.02a00120>; Paul Lyons, "Questions about the Question of 'Authenticity': Notes on Mo'olelo Hawai'i and the Struggle for Pono," in *Native Authenticity: Transnational Perspectives on Native American Literary Studies*, eds. Deborah L. Madsen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010); Trask, *From a Native Daughter*.

30 Even the discussion of *mele ku'e*, literally "songs of resistance," in the latest edition of *The Encyclopedia of Hawaiian Music and Musicians*, focuses on the lyrics rather than the musical sound. Much of the music of *mele ku'e* can be said to conform to the *nahenahe* aesthetic.

Renaissance and possessing beautiful vocal and guitar talents, Helm's commercially available musical legacy is reduced to Wong's bootleg quality recordings.<sup>31</sup>

## Soft Power

It is in considering a softness underlying *nahenahe* — and by extension, readers can listen for other examples readily drawn from the constellation of genres, performative and aesthetic properties, artists and ensembles I describe or list earlier — that I want to conclude my remarks.

We will end by listening to two tracks from “Gabby” Pahinui and Leland “Atta” Isaac’s duet recording, *Two Slack Key Guitars* (Tradewinds 1969). The liner notes begin: “Slack key guitar cannot be adequately described, compared or analyzed. As Hawaiian as *limu* [algae, traditional Hawaiian food staple], it could almost be called an emotion poured from the very soul into the instrument.” With this in mind, we begin with the initial track, “I’m-A Livin’ On-A Easy,” sometimes used as an alternate title as “A-Livin’ On A Easy” is printed as a subtitle on the cover of the recording, below a photograph of Isaacs and Pahinui performing on their guitars while sitting on the grass beneath a shade tree, cane weave hats atop their dark black hair and smiling faces, yellow leis ‘round their necks, both men sporting matching bright red and white Hawaiian shirts, dark slacks, and bare feet.

Placing “I’m-A Livin’ On-A Easy” at the beginning of the album establishes the mood for the rest of the recording. The song is a playful first-person soliloquy on the unfettered joys of unemployment, homelessness, and, least convincingly, bachelorhood. A paean to the carefree ways of a footloose beach boy, the cover image of two middle-aged men as happy-go-lucky layabouts reinforces the idea of Hawaiians as childlike people whose

31 According to ethnomusicologist Amy Ku’uleialoha Stillman, Helm has a total of 62 unique tracks spread out over 88 total tracks on the four commercial recordings available — two on vinyl and two CD compilations. See <http://www.amykillstillman.wordpress.com/2011/07/19/crunching-data-the-music-of-george-helm-a-true-hawaiian/>.

lives of ease in paradise are fulfilled by the simple joys of good song, strong drink, and human companionship.

I want to suggest an alternate hearing/reading, however. Native Hawaiian priorities challenge the tenets of acquisitive capitalism, bourgeois social norms, and settler-colonialism, and representations such as the *Two Slack Key Guitars* cover hint at, if in exaggeratedly comic ways (at the expense of Hawaiians), alternative lives desired by harried tourists, middle-class office workers, and cosmopolitan elites. In the songs of *Two Guitars*, we witness aurally the attraction of Kanaka Maoli attitudes toward labor, the distinctions between the public and the private, and, most significantly, we hear the ways in which Local Hawai'i culture, characterized by a relative casualness to social difference, cultivates that casualness through *a constant attention to difference* rather than a denial of its presence.

Hawai'i is distinctive in the US for more than the level of militarization or that it is officially bilingual, recognizing both English and Hawaiian. Hawai'i is the only state in which *haoles*, whites, and *haole*-ness, whiteness, are made visible in ways that are familiar to people of color from the continental US.<sup>32</sup> To *haoles*, this feels like a spotlight is being thrust on them. To their brown- and black-skinned neighbors, this double consciousness, to sample W.E.B. Du Bois's formulation, this self-knowledge of the disjunct, contradictory, and negative ways in which one is perceived while working out the ways in which one's subjectivity can be lived is trans-generational, a piece of living passed on through the scrim of white supremacy, and no less frustratingly infuriating for remaining unavoidable.

Our final song, "Wahine U'i E," is a playful two-step dance number, for which the original liner notes describe: "Atta [Isaacs] and Gabby [Pahinui] are at their best using the give and take, you-play-one-I-play-one system. Instrumental." Perform-

32 Judy Rohrer, *Haoles in Hawai'i: Race and Ethnicity in Hawai'i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010); Judy Rohrer, *Staking Claim: Settler Colonialism and Racialization in Hawai'i* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016).

ing the social “give and take” of Native Hawaiian culture, the two guitarists perform as a single performer capable of performing on two guitars simultaneously, only modified by the number of bars given to each guitarist throughout the song’s progress. The track provides the ideal of *nahenahe*, a collective ideal, with an easy, relaxed virtuosity in which seamless collaboration is a privileged aesthetic criterion. The first full band chorus locates the far-fetched, by which I mean to call on George Lipsitz’s use of a wave’s long fetch as a metaphor for the histories of connections related through vernacular song with the Caribbean travels of Kanaka Maoli sailors sounded out in the rhythm guitar hinting at calypso and reggae strumming patterns.<sup>33</sup> “Wahine U‘i E” is a true duet requiring both guitarists to retain an individual voice while contributing to the two-guitar rendition of the song’s central theme, sharing the responsibility of conveying a coherent melody. The entire recording ensemble is largely a family affair. Besides the two guitarists, Isaac’s father, Alvin, performs on the ‘ukulele, with uncle Norman on bass and Harold Hakuole on rhythm guitar.

While there is a sweet, gentle sound, the song is anything but solemn. We can hear the dance roots of the music from the beginning with Atta Isaacs’s solo guitar introduction. It captures the feeling of a social dance, a collective celebration expressed through joined individual efforts. It is a song meant for movement for a community rooted to a particular place. It is a song for a community willing to open its arms to *malihini* (strangers) but always with a sense of mutual obligation and reciprocity. The comfortable lilting of the underpinning rhythm feels unhurried though energetic, never wavering throughout the entire performance, inviting listeners to dance or sway in time.

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33 George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), vii–viii; James Revell Carr, *Hawaiian Music in Motion: Mariners, Missionaries, and Minstrels* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

In conclusion, I want to suggest that the *nahenahe* aesthetic, which is often characterized as narcotic, even by some of its practitioners can be thought of as a sounding out against settler-colonialist logics by “acting softly,” that is, by thinking of agency not only through bold, “loud and hard” acts but through quieter, less volatile ways as well. Perhaps we might think of “soft agency” through the metaphor of water. Water has two fundamental ways of leveraging power. One way is patient. Water simply drips on the same spot, forever. Eventually, whatever the drops are hitting bear an ever-expanding cavity, slowly worn away with the patient drooling of water. The other way is for enough water to gather together to overwhelm: from individuals drowning to entire settlements disappearing in the wake of tsunami or floods to assisting earth and wind in mudslides and hurricanes. Water is often imagined as benign, but it carries the potential for death even as it is necessary for life.

Softness often uses a sly stratagem of patient corrosion — think, again, of the relationship between water and mineral, the soft liquid eventually working the hard mineral into sandy softness. Soft music almost imperceptibly reshapes materiality. Soft music is not anodyne or “safe” but intensely introspective while simultaneously active, alert, sensitive to the larger ambient context, enfolding itself in its narrowest cracks and crevices, enlarging the space it occupies with geologic tenacity.

*Nahenahe* as expressed in the buoyant “Wahine U‘i E” suggests defeating racism is possible through a relentless but patient demonstration of powerfully soft, aggressive gentleness, generous outpourings of love (a topic worth its own paper), and happiest when others are sharing in the *jouissance* expressed by the two guitarists sharing the melody. Hawaiian slack key guitarists’ musickings are forceful, agentive, and, refusing life within the colonial matrix, confront it with a seductive blend of exuberance and quiet charm, presenting a world of social relations in which differences are visible, even of *haoles*, and in which encounters of difference are not automatically confrontations but are transformed into moments of collaboration.



Like the slow drip of water, the efforts of the poorly funded PKO eventually paid off. In 1980, a consent decree was signed between the US Navy and PKO mandating the Navy to begin restoration of the island to its pristine state through soil conservation, revegetation, and goat eradication. In 1990, President George Bush banned the bombing of Kaho'olawe. The Navy would eventually cede the land back after they attempted to thwart the federal court judgment by failing to comply with the order to clear the island of any remaining ordinance, dragging its feet in clearing the island and finally evacuating, but leaving approximately twenty-five percent of the land uncleared. It would take until 2004 before the island was deemed clear of enough unfired ordinances, or unexploded bombs, to accede the island completely over to the State of Hawai'i. However, there has been little effort to restore Kaho'olawe to its pristine state, ostensibly because of the amount of live ordinances still on the ground but also a consequence of the lack of funding from the State to complete the task.

Still, the lessons to learn from the soft songs of the Kanaka Maoli are heard/seen most clearly if one turns around in the way ancient Hawaiians imagined their relationship to temporality, to walk backward in order to learn from the past, which we can now see clearly behind/before us, while not rushing into the future, behind us now, in a largely unknown unfolding. Turned around in this way, we can hear George Helm, Gabby Pahinui, Atta Isaacs, Fred Punahou, Leonard Kwon, Auntie Alice Namakelua, Keola Beamer, and countless others, performing their *nahenahe* songs in a gathering wave pitched toward the scales of the world. To do this soft work, we need only be relentless and patient, each of us a drop in the continuous wearing away of racism and racist ideology, awaiting the chance to join other drops in a transformative tsunami.