

HAWAIIAN MO'OLELO AS SITES OF RESISTANCE: MELE OLI AND TEMPORALITY IN KIMO ARMITAGE'S THE HEALERS

Carmen **Nolte-Odhiambo**, University of Hawai'i – West O'ahu,
cnolte@hawaii.edu

Original scientific paper
DOI: 10.31902/fll.52.2025.7
UDC: 821.622.821.2-93.09

Abstract: In *Beyond Settler Time*, Mark Rifkin observes how dominant temporal frames of reference position Native peoples either in the past or in a settler-defined present, thereby denaturalising Indigenous timespaces. My paper contends that the genre of adolescent literature participates in this process, as it is centred on stories of individuation, growth and maturation that are in sync with age-segregated Western temporality. Focusing on Indigenous narratives for young people in Hawai'i, my paper suggests that Hawaiian *mo'olelo* (stories and histories) can serve as sites of resistance to settler time as they employ traditional modes of storytelling – such as *mele oli* (chants) – that foreground Native tempos, rhythms and genealogies. To illustrate the important function *mo'olelo* can serve in affirming distinctly Indigenous sensations of time, I read Native Hawaiian author Kimo Armitage's adolescent novel *The Healers* (2016) as a text that transcends Euro-American genre conventions. By integrating *mele oli*, Hawaiian *mo'olelo* such as *The Healers* articulate the intergenerational expanse of Native temporality, defined by stories and genealogies that are carried in but exceed individual bodies and that link the ancient past with possible futures. This temporal vastness cannot fit within the much more confined timespace of Western individuation that serves as a defining factor of the adolescent literature genre. Hence, I posit, Native Hawaiian literary works for young readers, such as Armitage's novel, can productively “unsettle” the dominant conventions of writing for adolescents and challenge us to imagine the rhythms and tonalities of becoming otherwise.

Keywords: Native Hawaiian literature, adolescent literature, young adult literature, temporality, coming of age, Pacific literature, speculative fiction

1. Introduction

What does it mean for the Native child to come of age in Hawai'i, where dominant settler narratives invalidate Indigenous timescapes and

modes of becoming? Situated in a postcolonizing space, the Native Hawaiian child straddles a multitude of cultural and temporal borders: Within the Indigenous *Kānaka Maoli* (Native Hawaiian) framework, this child figure embodies Hawaiian futurity and hope, but in settler colonial discourse, it remains confined to backwardness and pastness. Negotiating these irreconcilably different configurations of the Native child constitutes an important impulse of the islands' literatures for young people, and these texts therefore tend to cross and blur the conventional boundaries of Euroamerican models of children's and young adult literature. Contending with the ways in which Native Hawaiian childhoods have been subjected to non-native spatiotemporal dynamics that cast the Indigenous child out of Native time, my article suggests that *Kānaka Maoli mo'olelo* (stories and histories) can serve as potent sites of resistance to settler temporal formations as they draw on distinctly Native conceptions of becoming and employ traditional forms of storytelling such as *mele oli* (chants).

To contextualize my discussion of adolescent literature in Hawai'i, let me offer a very brief sketch of the islands' history since the overthrow of Hawai'i's kingdom in 1893. The islands were annexed by the United States of America in 1898, leading to a severe suppression of the Native Hawaiian language and Indigenous cultural practices in the decades that followed. Reimagined as belonging to its U.S. American colonizers and placed in the service of their recreational as well as economic and military needs, Hawai'i became a state in 1959. Several decades later, in 1993, the U.S.A. passed the so-called "apology bill," which acknowledges that "[t]he indigenous Hawaiian people never directly relinquished their claims to their inherent sovereignty as a people or over their national lands to the United States" (qtd. in Trask 45). Nonetheless, neither their sovereignty nor their land has been returned to the Native Hawaiian people. Contemporary Hawai'i hence constitutes a settler colonial society, in which dominant Euroamerican cultural narratives exist in tension with Indigenous epistemologies.

In *Beyond Settler Time*, Mark Rifkin discusses how dominant temporal frames of reference, which position Native peoples either in the past or in a settler-defined present, denaturalize Indigenous temporal modes and processes of becoming. The prevalent insistence on a supposedly singular and shared present, Rifkin argues, privileges non-Native time-conceptions because this notion of coevalness is in fact "defined by settler institutions, interests, and imperatives" (viii). I contend that the genre of adolescent literature is one such institution that perpetuates dominant narratives of individuation, growth, and maturation that are in sync with age-segregated Western temporality.

The trajectories of young adult novels typically focus on a relatively short but highly meaningful period of individual human development – the teenager’s process of growing up over a timespan of a few years or less – which stands in stark contrast to “Indigenous narrations and sensations of time” that may employ “the setting of the significance of events within a much longer timeframe (generations, centuries, or millenia)” (Rifkin 19). By following distinctly Euroamerican understandings of time, the genre of adolescent literature relegates other conceptions of temporality to the margins of the text, if not entirely outside it.

Adolescent literature thereby adheres to what I call Euroamerican “aetotemporality” (from the Latin *aetas*, meaning “age”). As I have elaborated elsewhere, my term “aetotemporality” refers to “the distinct tempos, rhythms, and tonalities associated with human childhood, adolescence, and adulthood” (Nolte-Odhiambo 415). Within the Euroamerican context, aetotemporality captures the “patterning of individual human development along a path of progression from lack to agency,” whereby “the child is constituted as a not-yet subject in an asymmetrical power relation with the adult that is decreed to be ‘natural’” (Nolte-Odhiambo 415). Diversifying the genre of adolescent fiction would mean not “adding color” by incorporating non-white characters into conventional timelines but rather “[n]oting the existence of multiple temporalities that cannot be unified into a singular timeline, [which] means acknowledging the diversity of processes of becoming and the variety of potential interrelations among those processes” (Rifkin 17). Taking up Rifkin’s point that Indigenous texts present “possibilities for envisioning and engaging with alternative temporalities” (47), I posit that Hawaiian *mo’olelo* affirm a distinctly Indigenous sense of aetotemporality, and I read Kimo Armitage’s young adult novel *The Healers* (2016) as a text that subverts Euroamerican genre conventions by affirming a Native Hawaiian sense of time.

Defying many typical cornerstones of the adolescent literature genre, Armitage’s narrative builds on the long tradition of *mo’olelo* to foreground traditional *Kānaka Maoli* tempos and modes of storytelling, such as *mele oli* (chants). These *mele oli* describe much longer timeframes than the relatively short period of individual human development during adolescence, highlighting instead the rhythms of intergenerational connections: “*Ka po’e kahiko* (the people of old) of Hawai’i were *ha’i mo’olelo* (storytellers). *Oli* (chant), *hula* (dance), and *mo’okū’auhau* (genealogy) are traditional methods of storytelling. In this way *mo’olelo* transcend time and space, linking each succeeding generation to the ones before as well as those yet unborn, an unbroken

chain of continuity of the ‘Ōiwi [Hawaiian] culture” (Halliwell vi). The incorporation of Hawaiian chants into a text for young readers hence presents a significant act of resistance to dominant epistemologies of storytelling and time. Alongside these *mele oli*, Armitage’s novel features a non-linear, multigenerational narrative with a variety of narrators and characters who are young, old, human, animal, alive, dead, ancestor, and unborn. Ultimately, *mo’olelo* like *The Healers* cannot be mapped onto the settler timeline or be made to fit the Euroamerican aetotemporal foundations of adolescent literature conventions. Instead, they pluralize time by affirming an Indigenous temporality that does not correspond to any When or Then of Western time.

2. Speculative Fiction, *Mo’olelo*, and *Mele Oli*

Much of twenty-first-century adolescent literature, particularly with its contemporary emphasis on dystopian narratives, falls under the large umbrella of speculative fiction. Marek Oziewicz notes that speculative fiction can function as “a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating ‘consensus reality’ of everyday experience” and, as such, “includes fantasy, science fiction, and horror, but also their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate genres.” Moreover, speculative fiction has gained traction as a literary category in part due to “the proliferation of indigenous, minority, and postcolonial narrative forms that subvert dominant Western notions of the real” (Oziewicz). Since *The Healers* invites its readers to consider non-Western epistemologies, alternative (hi)stories, and Indigenous wonder and liberation, it seems appropriate to read the novel within the framework of speculative fiction. Indeed, the genre accommodates not only “the non-mimetic genres of Western” fiction “but also non-Western and indigenous literatures – especially stories narrated from the minority or alternative perspective” (Oziewicz). At the same time, however, the fact that speculative fiction serves as an umbrella category for all fiction that does not conform to Euroamerican understandings of the real also betrays the continuing dominance of these conceptions of what counts as real. Put differently, only literature adhering to the Euroamerican real ultimately gets to enjoy the label of realist fiction, whereas texts depicting other, minoritarian versions of the real are relegated to speculative fiction and hence to the realm of the fantastic, or the unreal.

In Hawai’i, the colonial strategy of removing Indigenous epistemologies from what constitutes the real has a long and fraught history. In *Legendary Hawai’i and the Politics of Place*, Cristina

Bacchilega explains the devaluing of Native Hawaiian *mo'olelo* via the translation of this term into English:

Naming—always already a renaming—has been a powerful tool of colonial rule and cultural appropriation. From early on, Native Hawaiian narratives, or *mo'olelo*, were for the most part identified by Western travelers, scholars, and popularizers as “legends,” or “myths” and “folktales” interchangeably, and thus seen as “folklore,” a newly formed category in European and American nineteenth-century thought. Because “folklore” was and is often viewed in the science-centered West as an outmoded or “false” way of knowing, this classification has unfortunately also provided an opening to view the *mo'olelo* as “untrue.” [...] This has resulted in erasing the meaning of “history” carried in the Hawaiian word and genre, with *mo'olelo* being translated and understood only or primarily as “story.” (9)

As Bacchilega observes, the *Kānaka Maoli* narrative genre of *mo'olelo* does not distinguish between the real and the fantastic along the same lines as Euroamerican classifications do. Literally translating to “succession of talk” and thus capturing the oral transmission of knowledge in old Hawai'i, *mo'olelo* includes all of the following Western genres: “story, tale, myth, history, tradition, literature, legend, journal, log, yarn, fable, essay, chronicle, record, article; minutes, as of a meeting” (“Mo'olelo”). *Mo'olelo* often relay cosmological frameworks that showcase humans' genealogical relationships not only with each other but with all natural entities, and they establish ties between the past, present, and future by “connecting generations to their kupuna (elders) and preserving cultural heritage” (Indriyanto and Rudy 131).

Mo'olelo are thoroughly interwoven with the Hawaiian storytelling forms of *mele* (songs and poems) and *mele oli* (chants). Because no precise English equivalencies exist, there are multiple possible translations not only for *mo'olelo* but also for *mele* and *oli*. Noting that *mele* cannot be categorized neatly in Western terms, Native Hawaiian literary scholar ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui explains that it refers to songs, chants, and poetry alike: “While songs, chants, and poems are considered separate genres in Anglo-American literary traditions, in Hawaiian literary traditions they often overlap; the primary distinctions among them come from the mode of performance: a song is sung, a chant is chanted, a poem is recited” (“He Lei” 30). *Mele oli*, or just *oli*, is a term for chants without accompaniment, and many different genres

of *mele oli* exist, including genealogy chants, place chants, love chants, and mourning chants (ho'omanawanui, "He Lei" 35).

A particularly important *mele oli* for Native Hawaiian epistemology of time and place is the creation chant *Kumulipo*, which "recounts the beginnings of the Kanaka Maoli concept of the universe, through the evolution of all living creatures, culminating in the birth of kanaka (people), and the complex mo'oku'auhau (genealogical lines) from the first woman, La'ilai, through her distant descendant, countless generations later, the Ali'i Nui (high chief) Kalaninui'iamamao, born sometime in the 1700s" (ho'omanawanui, "He Lei" 37). Over 2,000 lines long, the *Kumulipo* was memorized and passed down orally by *Kānaka Maoli* genealogists (ho'omanawanui, "He Lei" 37). The chant highlights the interconnectedness between past, present, and future generations as well as their intimate belonging to their land, with whom they share a cyclical and reciprocal relationship (Halliwell xii).

Native Hawaiian scholar Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada articulates this intergenerational expanse of *Kānaka Maoli* temporality when he writes that "We native peoples carry our histories, memories, and stories in our skin, in our bones [...] in our children. [...] Our genealogies are a backbone stretching to the very inception of these islands. [...] The future is a realm we have inhabited for thousands of years. You cannot do otherwise when you rely on the land and sea to survive." *Mele oli* are foundational for expressing and fostering this distinctly Indigenous sense of time and place.

3. Adolescent Literature and Native Time

The embodied and relational Hawaiian ways of knowing expressed in *mele oli* such as the *Kumulipo* stand in stark contrast to the Euroamerican aetotemporalities elaborated in adolescent literature. While the former highlight intergenerational and interspecies interdependence, the latter emphasize individualism and independence instead. Moreover, adolescent literature's depiction of individual development as a trajectory from lack to empowerment resonates with conceptions of non-Western places like Hawai'i as temporally distant and childlike. When extended from the individual plane to the global geopolitical context, the narrative of growth perpetuated by the adolescent literature genre's coming-of-age formula positions only a few nations as having already attained the maturity of adulthood while characterizing the rest as the "developing world," an idea that "rests on an inherently hierarchical version of the real [...] bound up with figurations of the child" (Castañeda 44). As anthropologist Johannes Fabian puts it, "*geopolitics* has its ideological foundations in

chronopolitics” because of the colonial temporal ordering that results from “placing the Now of the [so-called] primitive in the Then of the Western adult” (144; 63). As children’s literature scholar Kenneth Kidd comments, “adults can be minors too, culturally if not also legally” (15). This is the case, I would suggest, for Indigenous adults in Hawai’i, who occupy a minoritarian position even on their Native land. Fabian has called the temporal alignment of non-Western peoples with children “a classical example for ‘methodological’ abuses of Time” and noted that it renders Native children “even more infantile,” or doubly distanced from fully-fledged adulthood (61).

The predicaments resulting from the infantilization of Indigenous adults alongside the double infantilization of their children continue to cause significant harm to Native peoples, as Julie Kaomea observes within the context of Hawai’i: “Dominant discourses that construct indigenous children as needy, helpless victims, while simultaneously stigmatizing their parents and families as deficient caretakers, suggest that to save indigenous children, the parents’ influence must be minimized – a 21st-century version of killing the Indian to save the man” (92). Positing Indigenous adults as childlike, immature, and incompetent, Western institutions such as social and educational services participate in neocolonial projects in settler societies like Hawai’i, where they “are virtually ‘kidnapping’ contemporary Native Hawaiian children by devaluing and supplanting indigenous Hawaiian child-rearing knowledge” because these Indigenous child-rearing practices do not align with Euroamerican aetotemporal trajectories of maturation (Kaomea 79).

Drawing on the specious similarities between the child and the Indigenous, children’s literature scholar Perry Nodelman has claimed that childhood constitutes a colonized space not only in settler societies but globally, with adult/child dynamics mimicking colonizer/colonized relations (166-67). This argument has been rightfully critiqued for its faulty analogy, which neglects the manifold ways in which the sociopolitical status of children and colonized peoples differ. In addition, Nodelman’s analogy disregards the temporal dimensions of childhood under the dominant aetotemporal order, which grooms at least some children to grow out of their disenfranchised position and become adults themselves, with adulthood here constituting a symbolic achievement of full majoritarian personhood and citizenship. Responding to Nodelman, Victor R. Ramraj asserts that “the actual colony, unlike the colony of childhood, has literal oppressive military forces, literal political prisoners; and the actual colony does not literally grow out of its colonial state as does the child who, on reaching the age

of majority, is no longer a colonized figure but now takes his or her turn at being an adult-imperialist” (qtd. in Lassén-Seger 12). Importantly, however, for Indigenous peoples in settler societies, childhood does indeed continue to delineate a postcolonizing timespace as Euroamerican aetotemporality is imposed on Indigenous youth, whose own epistemologies of time are thereby forcefully denaturalized and marginalized.

Considering the history of youth literatures as well as of the dominant modern constructions of childhood and adolescence, the perpetuation of Euroamerican temporalities in the pages of children’s and adolescent fiction comes as no surprise. Neil Postman has argued that the understanding of children as fundamentally different from and deficient vis-à-vis adults was fostered by the spread of literacy in Europe. Drawing on Rousseau, who called reading “the scourge of childhood, for books teach us to talk about things we know nothing about,” Postman writes that “reading is the scourge of childhood because, in a sense, it creates adulthood” (13). He maintains that the concept of childhood was absent from the medieval imaginations due to the lack of literacy and formal education but that the onset of printing gave rise to a new sense of what it meant to be an adult, and hence also of what it meant to be a child: “The printing press created a new definition of adulthood based on reading competence, and, correspondingly, a new conception of childhood based on reading incompetence [...]. That is why there was no such thing as children’s literature [before]” (17-18). Indeed, literature and stories geared specifically towards children started to appear in Europe only in the mid-eighteenth century. According to Postman, then, it is due to printing that children had to start earning adulthood by learning how to read and write, and formal education became compulsory precisely for the purpose of teaching children these skills that were now required for achieving full adulthood, here meaning full cultural literacy and competency.

Due to the importance placed on literacy, children started to enter a process, beginning at birth, of becoming adults, with adulthood now not merely a biological life-stage but rather a symbolic accomplishment. While print ultimately resulted in written knowledge becoming more accessible to adults, it created a different kind of knowledge monopoly as children became increasingly separated and closed off from the everyday adult life they had been involved in previously (Postman 49; 76). With the increasing importance placed on literacy, children were subjected more and more to the supervision of teachers and parents and to what these authorities deemed suitable reading material for them.

But of course, this creation of a child/adult binary based on literacy was absent in oral cultures such as old Hawai'i and, as a consequence, the line between the child and the adult remained much more fluid in places where the transmission of knowledge occurred not through reading and writing but through observation, participation, and oral storytelling genres such as *mo'olelo* and *mele oli*. Formal education imposes this child/adult binary developed in Europe onto Native peoples elsewhere, and thus schools in places like Hawai'i work to interpellate the Native child into settler time. Euroamerican literature participates in this process, not least because Native Hawaiian and other Indigenous "knowledge systems traditionally circulate through oral narratives that operate outside Western literary frameworks" (Indriyanto and Rudy 129). Hence education in literacy that seeks to devalue oral traditions, including musical traditions such as chanting, can be considered a biopolitical tool that severs connections to Indigenous epistemologies and aetotemporalities.

A concept even younger than modern childhood, adolescence too has its origins in the Global North: "This 'third-age' accelerated in the post-war years in the United States, England, continental Europe, and Japan, before spreading to the whole world" (Garcia 397). Specifically, adolescence developed out of the need to find a bridge that would allow the maturing individual to overcome the ever-widening chasm created between the realms of childhood and adulthood. Tristan Garcia notes that modern adolescence constitutes "the between-the-two par excellence" and has grown "from being a *threshold* to being an *enclosure*. The time between childhood and adulthood became long, too long to merely be an event, an isolated ritual, because what separates childhood from adulthood became too important" (396-97). Just as the modern conception of childhood has been imposed on Indigenous peoples by the Global North, so has this idea of adolescence as a space of enclosure to which Native teenagers would henceforth find themselves confined.

This invisibilization of Indigenous timespaces occurs, in part, via the collaboration between the dominant aetotemporal apparatus and the conventions of adolescent literature. In her study of the genre, Roberta Seelinger Trites observes that adolescent literature relies on "the *Bildungsroman* formula [which] mandates a plot determined by the concept of growth as linear," so that it follows "a narrative of transcendence: the individual grows into an adulthood of autonomy and self-determination" (118; 18). The *Bildungsroman*, which has its roots in the romantic era and expresses that era's belief in growth and individuation, depicts, in Hans-Heinrich Borchardt's words, a movement

“from error to truth, from confusion to clarity, from uncertainty to certainty, from [...] nature to spirit” – in other words, a movement from childhood to adulthood (qtd. in Trites 11). As such, the *Bildungsroman* embodies Euroamerican aetotemporal values, and hence adolescent literature, by employing the romantic models of growth and development on which the *Bildungsroman* rests, functions as an important cog of the dominant aetotemporal machine. The genre thus reinforces binary, hierarchical conceptions of childhood and adulthood even as it is ostensibly designed as a guide for those caught in between these two opposing spheres.

Given the ways in which dominant definitions of adolescent literature foreground the teleological paths of the *Bildungsroman*, the genre relies on understandings of childhood and adolescence that effectively exclude Native Hawaiian youth. Unlike Euroamerican aetotemporal constructions, *Kānaka Maoli* conceptions do not figure the child as lacking, in a state of “not-yet-ness,” and hence in need of traversing specific paths via adolescence toward adulthood and thus full humanity. But, as Rifkin reminds us, “if story has the ability to realize modes of perceiving and living time, then that potentiality can be enacted through Native forms of writing and cultural production” (46). In refusing to conform to the adolescent literature formulae and instead affirming Indigenous temporality, Native Hawaiian *mo’olelo* for young readers can hence assert what Rifkin calls “temporal sovereignty” and provide an important source of validation for *Kānaka Maoli* youth (16).

4. Aetotemporality in Kimo Armitage’s *The Healers*

Showcasing trajectories that differ profoundly from the conventional aetotemporal dynamics of individual maturation, Armitage’s novel refrains from inscribing its Indigenous characters into settler time and thus engages a strategy of refusal. It does not seek recognition and legibility within settler-determined frames but instead emphasizes *Kānaka Maoli* endurance and difference. While the multicultural model prescribes integration – a process whose temporal framework is not neutral but grounded in Western time and normativity – *The Healers* instead unsettles the dominant conventions of writing for adolescent readers and their aetotemporal foundations. As ho’omanawanui emphasizes, “the very act of creating *Kānaka Maoli mo’olelo*, as opposed to mimicking Western writing, is political, and thus empowering” (Hā 90). It is precisely by refusing mimicry and by not seeking “to become temporally intelligible to non-natives” that *The Healers* succeeds in bringing to the fore *Kānaka Maoli* modes of being and becoming (Rifkin 5).

Rather than providing an in-depth exploration of the *Kānaka Maoli* epistemologies articulated in Armitage's text, my intent in this section is to interrogate settler literary institutions and specifically the often unexamined Euroamerican premises of the adolescent literature genre. Hence my discussion here aims not to provide a comprehensive reading of *The Healer's* cultural nuances but rather to expose the ethnocentric biases and limitations of adolescent literature conventions. In order to illustrate how the genre fails to capture narratives that have grown out of other cultural contexts, I seek to highlight the complex ways in which Armitage's novel differs from the Euroamerican storytelling conventions for young readers. The multifarious differences are prominent both in the novel's form, which heavily evokes *Kānaka Maoli* modes of storytelling such as *mele oli*, and in its content, particularly as pertains to depictions of family life and of death.

The Healers features several Hawaiian chants and underscores the important function these *mele oli* serve in affirming Indigenous sensations of time and place. In her reading of *The Healers* as a text that "begins to fill the void in Hawaiian narratives for adolescent readers," Caryn Kunz Lesuma discusses a sequence of chants performed by adolescent protagonist Keola as he seeks to be accepted as a student by an eminent healer and *kumu* (teacher) (93). Composing and performing three consecutive chants, Keola pauses after each chant to assess his performance and discuss the meaning of the chant. Lesuma comments that "Armitage is careful to explain some of the *kaona* (hidden meaning) of the *oli* after they are uttered, a feature usually missing from oral narratives" (93). The novel thereby highlights "the depth and layering of meaning that is present in Hawaiian oral forms" while making these oral forms accessible to adolescent readers, particularly those who may lack the cultural competency to fully interpret the chants themselves (Lesuma 93). Moreover, and with the notable exception of place names, the chants are rendered largely in English rather than Hawaiian as Armitage seeks "to make these forms accessible through explication and translation" to his young adult audience (Lesuma 93).

In-depth familiarity with the Hawaiian knowledge systems conveyed by *mele oli* is a crucial prerequisite for *Kānaka Maoli* healers. It is therefore not surprising that the *kumu* whose guidance Keola seeks will only accept the teenager as a student if he proves himself worthy through chanting. In their analysis of the novel, Kristiawan Indriyanto and Dian Syahfitri observe that healers "must know the chants to pull the universe's healing energy into the sick patient" (16). Armitage's book thus underscores the intimate connections between *mele oli*, healing,

and “Hawaiian culture, where nature, humanity, and the spirit world coexist harmoniously” (Indriyanto and Syahfitri 15).

Furthermore, the *mele oli* that punctuate the text help to articulate the expanse of Native Hawaiian temporality, defined by stories and genealogies that are carried in but exceed individual bodies and that link the ancient past with the distant future through the land they share. Armitage makes this connection explicit in the following passage:

When Hawaiians die, their bodies were interred in the land. After a time, their bodies became the earth. The earth became a womb for the plants. Men consumed these plants. When a man died, he was returned to the earth. It was a spectacular cycle. This is how Hawaiians are connected to the earth. If a family had lived in an area for generations, their ancestors made the land where they lived and grew their food. (166)

The *mele oli* in *The Healers* highlight this familial intimacy between the land and genealogy, which includes humans, flora, and fauna alike, in ways that deterritorialize settler colonial discourse around becoming and belonging. As such, they make palpable the extent to which *Kānaka Maoli* epistemologies “unsettle” dominant ways of knowing and being.

This “unsettling” is apparent also in the ways in which *The Healers* challenges Western modes of linearity and historical chronology. The novel is set on the island of O’ahu, which has seen such a steady, overwhelming influx of foreign settlers that those who identify as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander make up only about a quarter of its population today (“Hawaii Population”). But the text, presenting an alternative timeline, features only main characters from Oceania and depicts their lives as shaped by *Kānaka Maoli* rather than settler ways of being and knowing. Instead of narrating the plot through a single focal character in chronological order, Armitage includes multiple narrators who relay interconnected tales spanning numerous generations in a narrative web that speaks to Native understandings of temporality and to intergenerational connections that far exceed the nuclear family.

In conventional narratives for young adult readers, parents play a genre-defining role: Typically serving as catalysts for conflict and as repressive forces, parental characters are obstacles that the adolescent characters must overcome, given the Western understanding of separation from parents as a prerequisite for growth into adulthood (Trites 56). That separation finds expression, for instance, in the incorporation of a school setting where adolescent characters pursue a formal education, in classical *Bildungsroman* fashion, outside the home

and away from parental restrictions. In *The Healers*, on the other hand, child and adolescent characters learn not in age-segregated schools but from exposure to the way of life and practices of the adults around them, who here serve as affirming rather than repressive forces. Hawaiian scholar Mary Kawena Pukui notes that children used to be involved “in nearly every aspect of family life. Little effort was made to shield children from the ‘realities of life’ as [in] Western society. [...] In old Hawaii, children learned skills by watching their elders,” just as the child characters do in Armitage’s text (qtd. in ho’omanawanui, “Moamahi” 92). Not only do the methods of learning differ, but the knowledge the young characters acquire by observing and participating in the world of adults around them diverges from the knowledge acquired in the Western education system as well: As the novel’s protagonists, cousins Pua and Keola, study the ways of traditional Hawaiian medicine and healing, they learn not by memorizing formulae from textbooks but rather by actively working with plants from the land and sea and by learning healing chants.

The Healers generally places much less emphasis on the traditional role of parents than readers of Euroamerican young adult fiction may be accustomed to. Following the common Native Hawaiian practice of *hānai* (adoption), Pua and Keola are raised by their grandmother, and even though they know their mothers, these women play only a minor role in the text. When the adolescent, unmarried Pua becomes pregnant, *The Healers* illustrates Pukui’s observation that “Hawaiians loved children and were adopters, taking the children of others to rear as their own” (qtd. in ho’omanawanui, “Moamahi” 92). Far from being shunned, Pua’s pregnancy is welcomed and celebrated: Her grandmother feels nothing but “joy and love” when she finds out, exclaiming that “We need more Hawaiian children in this world” (112; 144). The family’s neighbors even express their desire to raise the child if Pua does not want to raise it herself (147). *The Healers* here differs starkly from conventional young adult fiction, which typically depicts unplanned teen pregnancy as the undesirable outcome of adolescents’ lack of conformity to an aetotemporal order dictating that sexual activity, and especially sex that can lead to pregnancy, belongs in the realm of adulthood. Indeed, sexuality continues to present a topic of great ambivalence for a genre that is often concerned less with a realistic portrayal of sexuality than with teaching its young readers about the potential dangers of sex (such as unplanned pregnancy) as it takes great pains to guide its readers on the path to adulthood while simultaneously preserving at least some of their supposed youthful innocence.

Much like depictions of sexuality, representations of death in Western narratives for adolescents tend to oscillate between empowering young readers with knowledge and delimiting their de facto agency. Trites calls death the “sine qua non,” or defining factor, of the genre’s narratives, which tend to culminate in the adolescent characters’ acceptance of their own mortality (xii; 118). When it comes to the portrayal of death, adolescent literature as a genre sets itself apart from both texts for (younger) children and those for adults in significant ways. As Trites points out, children’s literature may incorporate death but typically only shows death occurring off the page and to characters older than the child protagonists; hence, death is here not an issue that main characters need to address in relation to their own sense of self. In adult literature, on the other hand, there is no specific convention regarding the portrayal of death, which can take myriad different forms. What characterizes adolescent literature is that “death is often depicted in terms of maturation when the protagonist accepts the permanence of mortality, when s/he accepts herself as Being-towards-death” (119). Differently put, young adult novels that incorporate the theme of death tend to do so in ways that show the adolescent protagonists confronting and, ultimately, coming to terms with not just the mortality of others but their own as well. Death represents the endpoint of the linear development that undergirds the *Bildungsroman* plot pattern, and the Euroamerican aetotemporal order maintains that awareness of Being-towards-death – a Heideggerian prerequisite for authentic *Dasein* – be acquired during adolescence.

In contrast, the opening pages of Armitage’s novel depict consciousness of Being-towards-death in two newborn *Kānaka Maoli* infants mourning their cousin, who died inside the womb: “Pua and Keola were sad because of the loss of their cousin. They cried for six months without stopping” (1). Clearly, this depiction of very young Hawaiian characters in *The Healers* – another of which remembers the time spent together with her twin “in her mother’s womb” (28) – signals an understanding of childhood starkly opposed to the Lockean figuration of the child as *tabula rasa* that continues to inform Euroamerican childhood constructions. Indeed, the life cycle presented in the novel functions as a cycle of being and agency that does not begin at birth nor end at death, and hence it does not adhere to Euroamerican aetotemporal divisions and modes of becoming. Far from demarcating the end of development, death is delineated by Armitage as a space of transition and potentiality that does not foreclose consciousness. One of the novel’s vignettes is in fact narrated in the first person by a character who has died: “Even though I was dead,” the character tells

us, "I believe I could still smell the clusters of ylang-ylang growing from the trees" (8). When a different character, Kealo, delivers a stillborn daughter in the ocean, the child takes "the body of a shark," who henceforth plays an active and decisive role as animal kin in the lives of Kealo's human-bodied descendants (7).

By blurring the conventional lines between life and death, child and adult, and human and nonhuman animal, *The Healers* brings into sharp relief the performative dimensions of aetotemporality as it elucidates how the timescapes of age and becoming can be otherwise. Native Hawaiian adolescent literature, such as Armitage's novel *The Healers*, hence occupies a precarious position as it does not conform to many of the conventions characterizing the adolescent literature genre. It thereby draws attention to the ways in which the Native Hawaiian child has been (and continues to be) removed from the conventional stories we tell about childhood, while at the same time affirming a place for Native aetotemporal epistemologies and storytelling traditions.

5. Conclusion

Authors of Indigenous fictions negotiate often irreconcilable differences between Native narrative traditions and dominant limitations of genre and form. Adhering to the latter, for instance by integrating Indigenous stories into the settler timescapes of adolescent literature conventions, can be a potent strategy for ensuring that these tales are published, disseminated, and read. But at the same time, Rifkin points out, it can "limit possibilities for envisioning other Indigenous experiences of time and expressions of temporal sovereignty" (5-6). Furthermore, Audra Simpson reminds us that "[t]here is a political alternative to 'recognition,' the much sought-after and presumed 'good' of multicultural politics. This alternative is 'refusal'" (qtd. in Rifkin 14). Since Native Hawaiian aetotemporalities do not fit within the confines of adolescent literature, such refusal of integration and recognition can open up the space for alternative modes of storytelling, as is the case for *The Healers*.

As it complicates the conventional boundaries not only of childhood and adolescence but also of the young adult literature genre, Armitage's novel draws on tropes and techniques of speculative fiction even as it ultimately remains firmly rooted in a distinctly Hawaiian tradition of storytelling. Rather than striving to make *The Healers* fit the genre of speculative fiction and thereby risking to devalue the Hawaiian ways of knowing it presents as mere fantasy, it might be more appropriate to consider the novel as an example of *mo'olelo* in the term's true sense. Understood as a contemporary iteration of the long

tradition of *mo'olelo* and *mele*, *The Healers* does not conform to the Western binary categorization of the real and the fantastic; rather it is a form of story and history all at once that blends poetry, prose, and chanting. It thereby participates in a long tradition of Hawaiian music and literature, which have “been carried from the ancient past to the postmodern present by chanters, singers, dancers, and musicians. In each successive period, different genres of *mele* have adapted new influences, from the Victorian waltzes of the nineteenth century to rap and hip-hop” (ho'omanawanui, “He Lei” 52). It makes sense, then, to consider Armitage's novel a contemporary *mo'olelo* that adapts the influences of the adolescent literature genre for a Hawaiian setting and worldview.

For young *Kānaka Maoli*, *The Healers* therefore “validates their cultural knowledge and offers a holistic representation of 'Ōiwi adolescence that balances cultural, spiritual, intellectual, and physical identity” (Lesuma 91). As such, a text like *The Healers* fulfills an important cultural function because it helps to convey an Indigenous sense of (hi)story alongside a distinctly Native Hawaiian temporality that emphasizes genealogy and the interdependence of past, present, and future. In the words of ho'omanawanui, “Kānaka Maoli today are sustained, fed, and empowered by our 'olelo, by the *mo'olelo* of our ancestors, by the literary ropes of resistance we weave for future generations who will, in turn, continue to travel the path of our ancestors *i ka wa pono*, when the time is right” (“Hā” 91).

Works cited:

- Armitage, Kimo. *The Healers*. Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 2016.
- Bacchilega, Cristina. *Legendary Hawai'i and the Politics of Place: Tradition, Translation, and Tourism*. Pennsylvania: U of Pennsylvania P, 2006.
- Castañeda, Claudia. *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002.
- Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia UP, 2002.
- Garcia, Tristan. *Form and Object: A Treatise on Things*. Trans. Mark Allan Ohm and Jon Cogburn. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2014.
- Halliwel, Tamara Ku'ulei. *MO'OLELO 'O NĀ IWI KŪPUNA: CONNECTING THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF THE NĀ 'ŌIWI MAMO*. 2017. U of Hawai'i at Hilo, MA thesis. <http://hdl.handle.net/10790/3416>
- “Hawaii Population Characteristics 2024.” *State of Hawai'i Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism*. June 2025. <https://files.hawaii.gov/dbedt/census/popestimate/2024/state-county-char/Highlights-Hawaii-Population-Characteristics-2024.pdf> Accessed 27 August 2025.

- ho'omanawanui, ku'ualoha. "Hā, Mana, Leo (Breath, Spirit, Voice): Kānaka Maoli Empowerment through Literature." *American Indian Quarterly* 28.1&2, 2004, pp. 86-91.
- ho'omanawanui, ku'ualoha. "He Lei Ho'oheno no nā Kau a Kau: Language, Performance, and Form in Hawaiian Poetry." *The Contemporary Pacific* 17.1, 2005, pp. 29–81. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2005.0008>
- ho'omanawanui, ku'ualoha. "Moamahi ā Pua'a Moe Poli Nā Keiki a nā Hānaiāhuhu i ka Mo'omeheu Hawai'i (Cherished Chickens to Chest-cuddled Pigs: Children and Pets in Hawaiian Culture)." *Childhood and Pethood in Literature and Culture: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies and Animal Studies*. Ed. Anna Feuerstein and Carmen Nolte-Odhiambo. New York: Routledge, 2017, pp. 87–106.
- Indriyanto, Kristiawan, and Dian Syahfitri. "Transpacific Environmental Imagination: Comparative Analysis of Indigeneity in *The Healers* and *Burung Kayu*." *Southeast Asian Review of English* 16.2, 2024, pp. 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.22452/sare.vol61no2>
- Indriyanto, Kristiawan, and Rudy Rudy. "'Seascape Epistemology' and Native Hawaiian Healing: A reading of Kimo Armitage's *The Healers*." *Studies in Linguistics, Culture, and FLT* 13.2, 2025, pp. 124-137. <https://doi.org/10.46687/ASXB3561>.
- Kaomea, Julie. "Reflections of an 'Always Already' Failing Native Hawaiian Mother: Deconstructing Colonial Discourses on Indigenous Childrearing and Early Childhood Education." *Hūlili: Multidisciplinary Research on Hawaiian Well-Being* 2.1, 2005, pp. 77-95.
- Kidd, Kenneth B. *Theory for Beginners: Children's Literature as Critical Thought*. New York: Fordham UP, 2020.
- Kuwada, Bryan Kamaoli. "We Live in the Future. Come Join Us." *Ke Kaupu Hehi Ale*, 3 April 2015. <https://hehiale.com/2015/04/03/we-live-in-the-future-come-join-us/>. Accessed 9 January 2023.
- Lassén-Seger, Maria. *Adventures Into Otherness: Child Metamorphs in Late Twentieth-Century Children's Literature*. Åbo, Finland: Åbo Akademi, 2006.
- Lesuma, Caryn Kunz. *Contemporary Young Adult Literature in Hawai'i and the Pacific: Genre, Diaspora, and Oceanic Futures*. 2018. U of Hawai'i at Mānoa, PhD dissertation.
- "Mo'olelo." *Ulukau: Hawaiian Dictionaries*. www.wehewehe.org. Accessed 8 February 2023.
- Nikolajeva, Maria. *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Nodelman, Perry. *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2008.
- Nolte-Odhiambo, Carmen. "From Aetotemporal Becomings to Petophilic Hospitality: Liminal Pet and Child Figures." *Parallax* 25.4 (2019): 412-426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2020.1731009>.

- Oziewicz, Marek. "Speculative Fiction." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 29 March 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.78>. Accessed 15 January 2023.
- Postman, Neil. *The Disappearance of Childhood*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Rifkin, Mark. *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*. Durham: Duke UP, 2017.
- Trask, Haunani-Kay. "Settlers of Color and 'Immigrant' Hegemony: 'Locals' in Hawai'i." *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai'i*. Ed. Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura. Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 2009, pp. 45-66.
- Trites, Roberta Seelinger. *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2000.

HAVAJSKE MO'OLELO KAO MJESTA OTPORA: MELE OLI I TEMPORALNOST U ROMANU *THE HEALERS* KIMA ARMITIDŽA

U *Beyond Settler Time*, Mark Rifkin primjećuje kako dominantni temporalni okviri pozicioniraju autohtone narode ili u prošlost ili u sadašnjost koju definišu kolonizatori, čime se potiskuju i osporavaju njihova sopstvena, autohtona vremena i prostori. U svom radu tvrdim da književnost za mlade učestvuje u ovom procesu tako što se usredsređuje na priče o individualnom oblikovanju, odrastanju i sazrijevanju, koje su usklađene s uzrasno podijeljenim zapadnim poimanjem vremena. Fokusrirajući se na autohtone narative za mlade na Havajima, moj rad sugerira da havajske *mo'olelo* (tradicionalne priče i predanja) mogu služiti kao mjesta otpora kolonizatorskom vremenu, jer koriste tradicionalne načine pripovijedanja — poput *mele oli* (pjesme/ritualne napjeve) — koji ističu autohtone ritmove, tempove i genealogije. Da bih ilustrirala važnu funkciju koju *mo'olelo* može imati u afirmisanju izrazito autohtonog osjećaja vremena, tumačim adolescentski roman autohtonog havajskog autora Kima Armitidža, *The Healers* (2016), kao tekst koji nadilazi evroameričke žanrovske konvencije. Uključivanjem *mele oli* i havajskih *mo'olelo* (poput *The Healers*) ovi tekstovi izražavaju međugeneracijsku širinu domorodačkog poimanja vremena, oblikovanog pričama i genealogijama koje se prenose kroz pojedinačna tijela, ali ih i nadilaze, povezujući drevnu prošlost sa mogućim budućnostima havajskog naroda. Takva vremenska prostranost ne može stati u znatno skućeniji vremensko-prostorni okvir zapadne individualizacije, koji je jedno od ključnih obilježja književnosti za mlade. Zato tvrdim da književna djela domorodačkih Havajaca namijenjena mladim čitaocima, poput Armitidžovog romana, mogu plodno „uzdrmati“ dominantne konvencije pisanja za adolescente i podstaći nas da zamislimo drugačije ritmove i tonalitete postajanja.

Ključne riječi: autohtona havajska književnost, adolescentska književnost, književnost za mlade, temporalnost, sazrijevanje, pacifička književnost, spekulativna fikcija