

Emma Nakuina (1847-1929) Continues to Make History Today

I invite you to take another look at Emma Ka'ilikapuolono Metcalf Beckley Nakuina's expression on the 2020 History Day button and on this page: the picture must have been taken in 1865, and she is 17, maybe 18, a student at Punahou (then O'ahu College) soon to graduate and then sail to college in California with her father.

Peer into her eyes: to you, does she look self-assured, proud, determined, firmly rooted as she faces the future? That's what I sense, and what I have learned about this remarkable Hawaiian woman reinforces my feeling. As the daughter of an American civil engineer and first professional photographer in Hawai'i and of the ali'i Ka'ilikapuolono of Kukaniloko, she knowingly poses for this portrait. Having grown up in the valley of Mānoa and raised on its stories—including the mo'olelo of the new water spring at her school's premises—she stands on and with a land she knows intimately and loves. At Punahou most of her haole teachers recognize her intelligence and talent in the English language, and within the Hawaiian ali'i court she is already training as a kaukau ali'i in the older kānāwai, the laws of the Kamehamehas, entrusted with Hawaiian knowledge, especially that concerning fresh waterways giving life to the 'āina and their mo'olelo. Her foundations are strong, her responsibilities are already great, her love for Hawai'i and its people, the lāhui, fills her. She knows their history and stories; she wants to retell these stories in ways that matter; she is poised to make history.

And in her long and full life she did accomplish all that. She was a lady in waiting to Queen Kapi'olani before becoming a wife, mother, author, judge, and lifelong scholar and educator. She was the curator—or “curatrix” as she called herself—of the [Hawaiian National Museum](#) and Government Librarian during King Kalākaua's reign; the Commissioner of Private Ways and Water Rights from 1892 to 1907, with her authority as a judge over water disputes being recognized by Hawaiian, the Republic's, and Territorial governments alike; and a well-known published writer, vocal contributor to the newspapers, and public speaker for some 50 years, from the early 1880s to her death.

Emma Nakuina also faced many disappointments, losses, and professional challenges. Her father's death meant no college degree for her; married at 20 and then again at 40 to a much younger man, she was widowed twice; several of her children died young and one who contracted leprosy was confined to Kalaupapa; following the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, she lived more than the final third of her life in an occupied and annexed Hawai'i where Hawaiians and Hawaiian knowledge were increasingly dismissed as backward.

We continue to find records of how she fought back. She used her words to sue those who took an estate from her and fishing rights away from her family; to submit formal complaints to the Bishop Museum's trustees when, as a Hawaiian kūpuna, she was insulted by its haole museum director; to educate the legislature as well as newcomers to Hawai'i about her people. She had the “feminine defiance” of her Hawaiian ancestresses, and how steadfast she was in her aloha and aloha 'āina, writing mo'olelo that helped to bring landmarks of Hawaiian history alive, taking in children of various races to hānai.

As a scholar of folklore—of both fanciful and non-fictional stories that groups of people tell to assert their being, knowledge, hopes, and beliefs—I first came to know Emma Nakuina as the author of the 1904 Hawai'i, Its People, Their Legends. As a settler in Hawai'i, I found myself included in Emma Nakuina's audience because she had clearly chosen to write English (in the book and in most of her work, even when Hawaiian was plentifully in circulation) in order to educate malihini like me, though of a different time. That was over 20 years ago, and I was changed as a scholar and person in Hawai'i by the strong and vital connections she materialized in that book between the islands, “every nook, cliff, valley or plain . . . strip of coast, headland or stretch of water,” its people—the Hawaiian people—and their stories. Continuing to find out more about her life, family, varied communities, and interventions has been a way for me as a settler in the 21st century to honor Emma Nakuina's legacy and determination as a Hawaiian woman living through such changing and turbulent times.

While I felt included in Emma Nakuina's audience and invited in to learn from her, I also believe those she wrote for—rather than simply to—were first of all Hawaiians, in her past, present and future, and their non-human relatives. That she wrote to give justice, aloha, and Native ways of life more of a chance in the future is evident in her retelling of mo'olelo.

But nowadays, as the current US political regime and COVID-19 bring us exceeding sadness, uncertainties, and questions about our future, some of Emma Nakuina's actions and writings reach out to us, Kānaka and not, in new ways. I will mention four.



Playing an active role in the foundation of the Hawaiian Relief Society, Emma Nakuina helped Hawaiians in need during the cholera epidemics that swept Hawai'i in 1895. Together with other Hawaiian women she saw to furnishing “disinfected poi to distressed ones” as the lack of Hawaiian food from their diet “brought on bowel complaints, weakened them, and made them easy prey for cholera” (*Hawaii Gazette*, September 10, 1895).

Hawai'i, Its People, Their Legends was published by the Hawai'i Promotion Committee, and it is clear from other writings by her that Emma Nakuina was asking herself questions that we are also facing in 2020 now that COVID-19 has denaturalized the image of a crowded Waikīkī. She thought it was important to regulate or shape tourism in Hawai'i in ways that would not further damage the 'āina, its people, or the representation of Hawaiian culture. Her 1904 book guided tourists to recognize the presence of Hawaiians, Hawaiian beliefs, and Hawaiian mo'olelo in places that may have otherwise appeared to be simply beautiful or picturesque. An early proposer of Indigenous tourism, in 1913 she went to the Promotion Committee with a proposal that they employ Hawaiian women “well versed in the history of Hawaii and its people” and “of irreproachable character” to take tourists around the island of Oahu (*Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, September 27, 1913). She clarified how the point about the women's character had everything to do with rejecting the get-go tourist fantasies about Native women.

Mana wahine and women were central to Emma Nakuina's vision of Hawai'i, past and future. In 1883, using part of her Hawaiian name Kaili, she published the first English-language version of a Pele and Hi'iaka mo'olelo, “Hi'iaka: A Hawaiian Story by a Hawaiian Native,” in the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*. Hawaiian-literatures scholar ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui has argued that publishing the Pele and Hi'iaka mo'olelo was throughout the mid-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries a political act sustaining Hawaiian nationalism, and it is no coincidence that Kaili's mo'olelo appeared just a few months after the coronation of Kalākaua, the king who, in the face of missionary contempt, revitalized hula and so many other Hawaiian traditions. If this publication was mana wahine in action, we also see that in 1917 Emma Nakuina hosted a reception for Almira Hollander Pittman in support of women's suffrage.

As we continue to fail some of the most vulnerable populations, I also returned to a piece that Emma Nakuina published in 1896 in which she intervened in the public debate about “reclaiming lands on Nuuanu stream banks” then “occupied by unsightly wash houses” and now days by the houseless in a park. Nakuina was at the time advocating for the creation, as Aiko Yamashiro noted in 2011, of that park because it would benefit Hawaiians, offering them “an open green, a breathing space” in which children and elders alike could go and meet friends. Nakuina wrote:

Such a place would be a real haven of rest to some of my poor, bewildered race, to whom the rapid march of recent events, the hustling of them by the newcomer, the overturning of what to them represents the majesty and power of stable government, has been a sort of moral cyclone. Their religious beliefs, as taught and accepted from the white man, have received a rude shock.

The park came into being and, thanks to the knowledge that Nakuina shared in the newspaper, it was named A'a'la, the older name of the site fragrant with hala blossoms. Always the historian, Nakuina reminded her readers “tradition has it that Kaahumanu, the famous wife of Kamehameha, planned and herself planted most of the lauhala grove of Aala” (*Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, October 9, 1896).

I am not suggesting she had solutions then for today's problems. Rather, Emma Nakuina continues to make history by calling on us to revalue Hawai'i, to reflect on how past decisions have affected Hawai'i and its people's lives, and to make decolonial choices for the future.

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Note: The accompanying photographs of Emma Nakuina are available through public domain. On Wikimedia, the first photograph is attributed to American photographer, Charles L. Weed, taken in 1865. The second photograph can be found on Wikimedia and in the Hawai'i State Archive and was taken circa 1904.

