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Pu'uhonua o Pu'uhuluhulu University: He kīho'īho'ī kānāwai no ka na'auao Hawai'i

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This poem speaks to the salt and the waters, the growth and the growing, the ebb and the flowing, and the endless aloha I have for myself and my lāhui who has transformed me. I come from the very Hawaiians who suffered at the disallowance of Hawaiian education. I had to actively choose to break that cycle in our immediate family and join our extended one in this reimagined present and future. Through education, I learned the importance of activism. So, in July of 2019, I joined a few dozen educators on the slopes of Mauna Kea, at a section of 'āina between our sacred mountain and Pu'uhuluhulu to stand in protection of our beloved lands. Soon, thousands of others joined us in the movement of protection with the goal of stopping the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT). These thousands of people had so much to teach and were so motivated to learn. This endeavor came to be known as Pu'uhuluhulu University, which served as “an actual place of Hawaiian learning” and an example of ancient wisdom in our contemporary lives. For this is education which liberates our people. Let it continue.

To know my history, I had to put away my books and return to the land. I had to plant taro in the earth before I could understand the inseparable bond between people and 'āina. I had to feel again the spirits of nature and take gifts of plants and fish to the ancient altars. I had to begin to speak my language with our elders and leave long silences for wisdom to grow.

— Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter*

Before I share this long and brilliant story of our people, our 'āina, our elders, and our mauna, I offer to you, my readers, a poem I recently wrote to welcome myself into a new rotation of life. This poem speaks to the salt and the waters, the growth and the growing, the ebb and the flowing, and the endless aloha I have for myself and my lāhui who has transformed me. Ke aloha 'āina iā kākou pākahi a pau.

Figure 1. *The author's poem, ala*

<p>ala</p> <p>ala 1. to rise up. arise. get up. come forward.</p> <p>'ala 1. fragrant. sweet-smelling.</p> <p>on a wednesday morning, in the malu of a mango tree my mother planted long before from deep in the honua, the first earth i knew</p> <p>i made my presence known it is 6:13am. ua ala ke 'ala.</p> <p>there is a light mist amongst the chaos hānau mua, that means first born i come from a long line of these my mother, my father her mother, his father i can keep listing, but we will hit pō</p> <p>the scent of this mist is what calls to my father the salt of joyful tears cleanses my mother 'o mākou 'ekolu just us three</p> <p>'o māhealani ke kane, 'o keiko ka wahine noho pū lāua a ua hānau 'ia mai</p> <p>& thus, i'm named <i>ke'alaanuhea</i> the soft-cool fragrant one</p>	<p>ala</p> <p>ala 2. path. road. trail.</p> <p>'ala 2. a variety of kalo, said to be pungent-smelling when cooked</p> <p>on a wednesday morning, in the malu of two mauna amongst māmane and lehua planted long before atop harsh pāhoehoe, within the elements</p> <p>i set forth on a new path it was 6:13am. ua ala ke 'ala.</p> <p>there is a cold breeze amongst the chaos lā mua, that means first day while i've been here for five days now i count this day as my first the day that broke my bones & carved rivers into rocks</p> <p>the elders chose the path, led the path, are the path we sat silently as they were taken one by one tears soaking through our skin the first water my body has tasted since my arrival a pikai to lead the 200+ days ahead</p> <p>'o ka wā ma mua, 'o ka wā ma hope ke kupuna o mua, kākou ma hope</p> <p>& thus, it is named <i>ke ala hulu kupuna</i> the path of the cherished elders</p>	<p>ala</p> <p>ala 3. to waken. stay awake. awake.</p> <p>'ala 3. perfumed.</p> <p>on this wednesday morning, in the malu of an ulu hala planted long before in the forest of panaewa, with the silence of loud birds</p> <p>i will awake to a new rotation it is still 6:13am. e ala ke 'ala.</p> <p>it will be a pleasant morning, only calm, that's how all my mornings are here lā hānau, that means birthday which isn't today, that was yesterday i've officially experienced my first full day in this new rotation</p> <p>i start each year the same, i enter the waters kanaloa pulls out my deepest desires i state my intentions, i sharpen my focus and kapukai the rest away</p> <p>'o 'oe a 'o au the fragrant, the pungent, the perfumed</p> <p>& thus, this poem is named <i>ala</i> i am done translating.</p>
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When reflecting on my life, I often separate my years into three parts: the part that raised and nurtured me and taught me right from wrong, the part that discomfited my being and threw me into the fire, and this moment. This new part I am still trying to understand and put words to it. And while those words are failing me now, I know it requires growth, reflection, and imagining something new.

I am a child of Papakōlea, O'ahu. A kanaka child with 40,000 grandparents and 400,000 gods. I am the dirt, the trees, the birds, the sea, the fish, the rain, the winds, and the sweet pungent-scent of Hāloa who came before me. I am my ancestors, as they are me. And all 4,000,000 of us are brilliant, intelligent, the dreams of dreams. I was once told a story of Hawai'i in the 1830s, the years following the arrival of missionaries. This story is my favorite as it speaks about our beauty. Did you know Hawaiians had purely oral histories? They passed down 'ike through chants, songs, dances, names, rains, and stories like these. We fed and nourished the generations from mouth to mouth, ear to ear, na'au to na'au. Then we learned this amazing thing called literacy.

Through this story, I learned that the information we were taught about how we learned to read and write and eventually preserve our mythology was only half true. Yes, the missionaries brought this thing called the printing press, which led to the establishment of our treasured nūpepa. And yes, those one million pages of documents serve as an archive of some of the best scholarship of that time. And yes, to write these

stories, we had to learn a new skill that was foreign to our being. But no, we did not learn how to do this from the men who killed our gods and called us savages. No, they aren't that smart, not clever, not patient, not caring, as we were taught to see them, the missionaries, I mean. They were selfish, short-sighted, and would stop at nothing to accomplish the goals necessary for their needs.

These missionaries arrived to our oral society in the year 1820. However, by 1832, the literacy rates throughout the Hawaiian Islands sky-rocketed to over 90 percent (Laimana, 2011). To make that clear, we went from a zero percent literacy rate to near perfection in 22 years. If one were to look at these numbers at a surface level, it would be easy to credit this incredible success to the settlers who arrived at the start of this new educational endeavor. And that is a story that we are often told. The missionaries taught Hawaiians how to read and write and advanced us into a new era of education; false.

Instead, I offer you this. We were able to teach ourselves. We established the first spelling book in Hawaiian known as the *Pīāpā*. We, the native teachers, used this print to teach our people. And we helped to facilitate the two-day long exams to prove our population's ability to read and write, showcasing our brilliance. And it wasn't just that. We, Hawaiians, showed up to these exams having traveled as far as 14 miles, eager to engage in the thrill of demonstrations and prove how deeply invested we were in this new form of education. And we did this all while dressed in our finest 'a'ahu, a sign of the potency and sacredness of education to us. And we didn't stop there. By 1841, under the direction of King Kamehameha III, Kūikeyaouli, public education in Hawai'i became compulsory. We were one of the first nations in the world to do so. This success in education advanced our country and our people (Laimana, 2011).

But this new-form of success was overshadowed. During this time, over 90 percent of our population was eradicated, our lands were purchased by missionary descendants and abused for the establishment and expansion of sugar plantations, and our people were displaced and forced to assimilate to European ideals to survive. In 1893, our government was illegally overthrown by a haole regime that eventually wrote a law 1896 mandating English medium education and outlawing the Hawaiian schools that helped to facilitate our literacy movements. The violence in this portion of our history is undeniable and informs the way we live today.

Since that time, Hawaiians have statistically been ranked one of the lowest performers in education. And as people who once were highly successful in achieving extraordinary feats regarding literacy are consistently testing in the lowest percentiles. Our schools, once seen as pu'uhonua, are deterrents and make our children feel inferior and unworthy. Our language has been stripped from our tongues and replaced with the language of colonizers. Identities have been muddled, so we no longer know what is old or new, correct or wrong, us or them. But that confusion doesn't mean everything was extinguished; deep down, we are still indeed ourselves.

Luckily, for the past three generations, our people have been awakened to this and are returning to the 'ike ku'una that can liberate our nation again. And it's working. We have rebuilt our schools, re-tilled our 'āina, and re-fed our minds. We are reviving our language and are starting with the young. Our children speak the sweet sounds of the ancient. They perform and excel and are once again eager to showcase their knowings the way our kūpuna did long ago.

This brings us to my story (or better yet, ours). I come from the very Hawaiians who suffered at the disallowance of Hawaiian education. My parents never touched higher education, and my grandparents never gave it thought. My great-grandparents did not graduate high school, and their parents were forced to stop speaking our native tongue. I had to actively choose to break that cycle in our immediate family and join our extended in this reimagined present and future.

At the age of seventeen, I enrolled in the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and was able to graduate with degrees in Hawaiian Studies and Hawaiian language. As a twenty-one-year-old, I continued that journey and pursued a master's degree in 'Ōlelo Hawai'i. By the age of twenty-two, I began teaching at the same university, in the very school that brought me back to my language. As a twenty-seven-year-old, I was hired as a permanent faculty member, an achievement beyond my wildest dreams. As a young adult, I felt that I had reached ultimate success through this type of job security. While that journey deserves to be celebrated, the next part of my story is what helped awaken me.

Through education, I learned the importance of activism. So, in July of 2019, I joined a few dozen educators on the slopes of Mauna Kea, at a section of 'āina between our sacred mountain and Pu'uhuluhulu to stand in protection of our beloved lands. The University of Hawai'i, which calls itself a Native Hawaiian Place of Learning and is the very institution that facilitated my formal learning, was allowing for the building of the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT). This telescope would destroy the highest point of our pae 'āina. I learned through my schooling that no buildings belong on our summits: not thirty stories or even thirty feet.

Soon, thousands of others joined us in the movement of protection with the goal of stopping the TMT. These thousands of people had so much to teach and were so motivated to learn. While standing on the front lines, we all came together to offer our skills to bring our intentions to fruition. For some, that was through 'āina conservation and out-planting native species on the slopes where we temporarily resided. For others, that was through preparing nourishing meals and feeding the populace. A small handful of hula practitioners facilitated the ceremony three times a day and invited the lehulehu to join in. Our kūpuna maintained their position in the middle of the access road known as "Ke Ala Hulu Kūpuna." I, on the other hand, used this opportunity to put the theories I've learned in school and teaching into praxis.

A week into our standoff, I scheduled a series of classes to be offered for anyone interested. These classes were taught by some of the best educators of our lifetime, making sure each island had representation, various lines of thinking were offered, and different forms of teaching were displayed. This endeavor came to be known as Pu'uhuluhulu University, which served as "an actual place of Hawaiian learning." This was a stab at the University of Hawai'i's mission to be such a place while ironically going against the very type of Hawaiian learning that centers our 'āina.

Figure 2. Author in front of Pu‘uhuluhulu, the pu‘u (hill) Pu‘uhuluhulu University was named for, sitting alongside the day’s teaching/learning schedule. Pu‘uhuluhulu is located across from the Mauna Kea Access Road and served as a hub for many services, like food, education, and health care, during the nine-month encampment. Photo credit: Mikey Inouye



For over eight months, I continued offering free education to anyone in our pu‘uhonua. Through this education, we were able to share stories of our people, reacquaint ourselves with our language, learn about other indigenous peoples, equip our minds to articulate our reasons, and stand strong in our identities. All the while remaining steadfast to the idea of being an actual place of Hawaiian learning, which I believe first and foremost puts the prominence of the health of our ‘āina and lāhui above all. From that came hundreds of classes and thousands of teachers, millions of students, and billions of stories. And now we have a new example of what can be.

Figure 3. Author at Mauna Kea. Photo credit: Malia Osorio



In the 1800s, hundreds of our kūpuna walked for 14 miles and performed for two days straight, achieving near-perfect literacy. In this 21st century, the least I could do was facilitate a space for us to achieve similar feats. Thousands of our lāhui traveled from all around the world 27 miles up a mountain and stayed for 256 days. Like our kūpuna, we came in the finest 'a'ahu of our time, with the purest intentions, eager and ready to learn and perform. And while that time of excellence has passed us once more, I believe that Pu'uhuluhulu University is an example of ancient wisdom in our contemporary lives.

I leave with you a line from a mele we chanted thousands of times on the mauna; *kūkulu ka pahu kapu a ka leo, he ala hele, he ala muku no Kāne lāua 'o Kanaloa, he kīho'īho'ī kānāwai*: the sacred drums voice is established, it is both a long and short journey to return to our gods (and practices), it is a restoration of learned experiences. For this is education which liberates our people. Let it continue.

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