He Mele no Kekuni

Noelani Goodyear-Kaʻōpua

I will never forget the night I learned of his passing into the realm of our ‘aumākua. I was at a poetry workshop with a bunch of other aloha ‘āina at Keawanui Loko I‘a on Moloka‘i. That ‘āina momona and beloved community gave me the safe space to cry and eventually to write this poem. It is a kind of mele inoa for the great me’e ‘onipa‘a, Richard Kekuni Akana Blaisdell. E ola kona inoa!
I first met Kauka Blaisdell when he was treating my uncle, who suffered from a rare blood disease. Kauka greeted us and spoke in Hawaiian, something I had never witnessed a physician do in a hospital before (or since). As a high school student learning our 'ōlelo makuahine, I was awestruck and intimidated.

A few years later, the morning after I gave the valedictory address at my high school graduation, he called my house and left a message on our answering machine. His voice was purposeful and deep, lilting upward when he spoke my name and drawing out its syllables:

“No e la ni...This is Kekuni. I heard your speech yesterday. You said a very important word: sovereignty. Please call me...”

Over the next several years, I would drop in to the Thursday night hālāwai Uncle Kekuni held at his Nu‘uanu home every week. It was there, around a table full of pūpū, that various strands of the early 1990s Hawaiian independence movement began to coalesce. It was a pu‘uhonua for me, then an undergraduate student at UH–Mānoa. At the time, independence talk was way out on the fringe, even in my Hawaiian Studies classes. Uncle Kekuni’s home was a gathering place and an archive for Kanaka Maoli sovereignty. In the living room a huge, mustard-yellow banner hung from floor to ceiling: ALL PEOPLES HAVE THE RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION; BY VIRTUE OF THAT RIGHT THEY FREELY DETERMINE THEIR POLITICAL STATUS AND FREELY PURSUE THEIR ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT.

A painting of the Hawaiian flag hung in another room. When I asked Uncle Kekuni about this “Ku‘u Hae Aloha” piece, he told us that one of his grandmothers was a hänai of Queen Lili‘uokalani and that this painting had been gifted to her. After the 1893 overthrow, his tūtū kept the painting on the back of a door, so it could be seen only from the inside the room when the door was shut. He said that, when
Kekuni in front of banner at home, 2005
Illustration by Kahealani Mahone-Brooks
asked, his tūtū never spoke about the queen or what had happened to her. This painting was her small way of keeping the flame of her love for country from dying out completely. Uncle Kekuni’s repositioning of the painting two generations later brought Hawaiian nationhood back into the center of the house, and he set out a pākaukau upon which all could share and feast.

In 2004, Kauka talked about his experience attending Kamehameha Schools, as he spoke on a panel against federal recognition under the “Akaka Bill.” The sponsor of the bill, US Senator Daniel Akaka, was his high school classmate. “Yes, indeed,” he said,

I was a student at the Kamehameha Schools when all the faculty were haole, fresh off the boat from America. It was their job to bleach us. Make us white! It was a military school; three times a week: drill; once a month: parade on the grounds. It was an industrial arts school to make blue collar workers out of us to work for the plantations, pineapple companies, and utilities, which were controlled by the haole Big Five. Official policy of the Kamehameha Schools. I was an electrician. I can change bulbs, wires, anything. In my graduation annual, it says: “Blaisdell, electrician.” Colonized! Colonized...we’re still talking colonial language, still permitting them to outline the playing field and what the rules are. No! We are a separate people, a separate country, a separate nation, a nation equal to the United States, not subservient, not subordinate.... The Akaka bill will make us subservient, make us subordinate. On that issue alone, we cannot accept it. Therefore, I not merely oppose, I not merely protest, I and all of must reject the Akaka Bill. Who is the United States...to recognize us? Did we ask them to recognize us? We recognize ourselves! We know who we are. We know who we are...
He closed that speech by leading the crowd in a rousing round from the song “All Hawai‘i Stands Together”: “‘Onipa’a kākou! ‘Onipa’a kākou a lanakila nā kini ē! E ola, e ola, e ola nā kini ē!”

‘Anakala Kekuni credited three Kānaka with bringing him to Hawaiian independence in the mid-1980s: Kihei Soli Niheu, Imaikalani Kalahele, and Puhipau. They, along with women like Ho‘oipo DeCambra, Moanike‘ala Akaka, Peggy Ha‘o Ross, and Haunani-Kay Trask, spoke at one of the first conferences on Hawaiian sovereignty, held at the Kamehameha Schools auditorium. Together these Kānaka aloha ‘āina, among others, birthed a new age of Hawaiian education that acknowledges political sovereignty as a critical part of restoring the health and well-being of our people.

To this movement, ‘Anakala Kekuni always brought fire in his words, accompanied by the biggest smile and the deepest aloha. He is the one who first invited me to embrace Hawaiian independence. He treated youth with tremendous warmth and genuine respect, even when we had not yet done anything significant for our people. He made us believe we could make a difference in the life of the lāhui. He was always mentoring, always helping to make connections and build relationships, always encouraging and uplifting. And of course, he was as meticulous in his photographing and note-taking of movement events and meetings as I am sure he was in his medical practice and scholarship. He was a consummate researcher, movement-builder, and teacher. To know him, to sit in his presence and to exchange hā with him, has been one of the greatest blessings in my life.

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Fire-keeper
Truth-seeker
Path-maker
Oppression-breaker
System-builder
Lāhui-tiller
Healer, Teacher, Internist
Leader, Convener, Activist

What shall I call you?
Kauka?  Kumu?  ‘Anakala?
You would say to simply     call you
                      Kekuni

But today
and always
               I call you     life-giver
this life        my life
this path        my path
began
with your call
that day       I was born

Your leo, your degrees, your kūlana scared me
anxious that you would see my indoctrination
the thinness of my connection     flimsy
knowledge chased for 13 years
I tried to disappear
from your sight
and despite
your kuleana       you called        again
embraced me with voice  
an invitation  
affirmation that sovereign speech is necessary to lift our nation  
you called me to hear  
the voices of our people  
gathering to indict America  
rediscover each other  
you rooted me  
in an ever-expanding circle of aloha ʻāina  
in mountains of files  
in boxes of photos  
in piles of t-shirts  
made fragrant by pua kenikenі  
in your breath  
Hū ka ikaika!  
No laila,  
I listened.  
I learned how  
you had studied  
blood  
found connection  
in the ashes of war  
studied imperialist illnesses  
and nurtured independent strains of resistance  
studied poverty  
and proliferated cures for cultural starvation  
To stave off stagnation,  
  you took our photos  
  to remind us when we made agreements  
  that we had conversations  
  that we had come together in celebration  
And, you,  
catching the rain in your outstretched arms  
mouth open with  
tones of our mother tongue  
unshakable and unassuming  
you gave boundless love, patience, and acceptance  
to each and every person  
yet tolerated no lies, no dispossession,  
no unbalanced equations or illegal invasions.
You gifted us words precise as scalpels
honi that made hundreds of generations palpable.

The burden of our movement may be heavy
but you were pure light
a lama kukui in a dark passage
leading to ka piko o ka honua

May your light always
guide our path,
o, keeper of the flame.

He inoa no Kekuni

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**About the Author**

Noelani Goodyear-Kaʻōpua is a professor of political science at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. The lands and waters of Kalihi and Heʻeia raised her. Noe has been an active member of the Hawaiian independence movement since 1993. She is the author and editor of multiple books about Hawaiian activism and education, including *The Seeds We Planted, A Nation Rising, The Value of Hawai‘i*, 2, and *Nā Wāhine Koa*. Noe’s research interests in Hawaiian social movements, Indigenous education, and decolonial future-making are indebted to the kumu and aloha ‘āina who came before her. She is a cofounder of Hālau Kū Māna public charter school and serves on the board of the Kānehūnāmoku Voyaging Academy and the Hui o Kuapā at Keawanui. Her most treasured role is being a mom to her three children.