

THE MUSIC OF RUMBLING PŌHAKU

Kyle Kajihiro

It was already dark when I arrived, so dark that I hesitated at the driveway, wondering if I was at the wrong address. Dense foliage concealed the house and muffled the intense discussion inside. I made my way up the stairs, passing kī and pua kenikeni plants. Through the window I could see a group of eight or nine people in a circle around a low table with food and drink. The surrounding darkness made the warmly lit interior seem extra luminous, as if to accentuate the urgency of the conversation.

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“Aloha mai!” a voice roared from the living room. Uncle Kekuni Blaisdell beckoned me to enter through the screen door.

I apologized for being late and set down the food I had brought to share. Uncle Kekuni squeezed both my arms and pulled me toward him. “We honi,” he said as he pressed his nose and forehead to mine and inhaled deeply. “THIS is how we greet each other.” This is how he greeted everyone, with eyes squinting and nose scrunched, relishing the exchange of hā.

It was Uncle Kekuni who taught me to honi. Coming from a local Japanese family where emotions and displays of affection were restrained, it felt awkward at first. But he taught me to cherish this act of connection and responsibility.

Clearing a stack of papers from a chair, he directed me to sit and introduce myself. This was my induction into the “Thursday Night Meeting” at his home. For several decades Uncle Kekuni convened Ka Pākaukau, a weekly gathering of activists and intellectuals with an ever-changing roster of new faces. To describe these as simply “meetings” misses the vitality of this space. Each gathering was an event, a transformational encounter. They were part information clearinghouse and part strategy council, social gathering, and spiritual devotional. Activists from around the world visited the Thursday Night Meeting, paid their respects, shared news and solidarity, exchanged gifts, and often requested, and usually received, support. Uncle Kekuni was always hungry for news and information about the happenings in the community and in the world. His weekly meetings provided a steady rhythm to the ebb and flow of Hawaiian activism, like a heartbeat circulating the lifeblood of ea.

We sat in an oblong, somewhat cramped circle, surrounded by banners, cultural implements, movement paraphernalia, and rolling hills of books and papers that stretched from the living room, to the dining room, and beyond. Here was a topography of Hawaiian thought and politics, where each event, debate, or struggle added new strata and contours to the landscape.



Honi

ILLUSTRATION BY KAHEALANI MAHONE-BROOKS

The Thursday Night Meeting included many passionate debates about the perils of the state-sponsored Hawaiian Sovereignty Elections Council, discussions of the threatened eviction of the Pai ‘Ohana from Honokōhau, analysis of the aftermath of the Mākua eviction, reports on struggles across the region—from independence struggles in East Timor to nuclear testing in French Polynesia—and many other pressing topics of the day. Sometimes the order of business included follow-up activities to Ka Ho‘okolokolonui Kānaka Maoli—The Peoples’ International Tribunal, Hawai‘i, of which Uncle Kekuni was the convener, or planning for the annual Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea celebration at Thomas Square, the Hawaiian national holiday he helped revive in the 1980s.

Inspired by dynamic Pacific Peoples’ movements such as the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific, Uncle Kekuni challenged us to remove the colonial blinders from our geographic imaginations. He often lamented why so many people in Hawai‘i defined themselves through their relationship to the United States. He reminded people that long before European explorers called it the Pacific Ocean, these islands were part of Moananui, the great liquid continent that linked the peoples and lands of Oceania. Ka Pae ‘Āina, a term he preferred to “Hawai‘i,” belonged to Moananui, and the peoples of Moananui were family. He insisted that this shift in orientation and geographic perspective was crucial for decolonizing our thinking about what Hawai‘i is and can one day become. “We were never lawfully annexed,” he maintained. “No laila, we cannot secede. The United States must *withdraw* from Ka Pae ‘Āina.”

I first heard the term “Kanaka Maoli” from Uncle Kekuni. “I am Kanaka Maoli, a true person of this land,” I can hear him say, as he taps his chest with his two fists. To him, “Hawaiian” and “Native Hawaiian” were identities of colonial misrecognition. Today, the terms Kanaka Maoli and Kanaka ‘Ōiwi are widely used.

I admired Uncle Kekuni’s gentle yet fierce kū‘ē spirit. While he abhorred violence, he always supported those resisting the structural violence of occupation and settler colonialism. In 2003, when the US Army proposed to station a Stryker brigade in Hawai‘i and expand its footprint by twenty-five thousand acres, nearly the size of Kaho‘olawe, Uncle Kekuni was arrested for protesting this military land grab. Leading up to the arrest, the army had attempted to suppress dissenting voices

at a series of public meetings to comment on the Stryker brigade environmental impact statement. At the first meeting, which was held at a private country club, opponents of the plan were prohibited from bringing signs into the venue. Four persons, including myself, were arrested when we insisted that our signs served as testimony at this public hearing. When Uncle Kekuni heard of the first arrests, he was incensed and insisted on being in front and possibly facing arrest at the second public meeting.

The following evening, at the Helemano Plantation in Wahiawā, another private venue, security personnel again barred any persons carrying signs from entering. Leading a line of protesters, Uncle Kekuni confronted the towering wall of security personnel with their arms locked. As the crowd chanted he pleaded softly with a young Polynesian security guard to let us in. Uncle Kekuni held his hands up the chest of the guard as if to say, “If you will not let us pass, then you must arrest me.” The guard looked ashamed. That night, Uncle Kekuni and two others were arrested. In the midst of an otherwise chaotic scene, I recall the calm smile he wore as the police led him to the squad car. The image of a prominent kupuna being arrested at a US Army meeting was a public relations nightmare for the military. At the next public hearing, all were allowed to enter.

But for me, the most important moment of the night happened prior to the confrontation with security guards. We had gathered in a circle under eucalyptus trees, holding hands in the waning light. As he had done many times before, Uncle Kekuni offered an oli to focus our energies and ask for guidance and protection. He began softly, with the raspy sweetness and slow, undulating ‘i’i of his voice. As he got louder, his voice grew deeper, coarser, like he was chanting through gravel. This is the image of Kekuni Blaisdell I leave for our memory: A circle of people focused on ea in the darkness, Uncle Kekuni squeezing hands on either side of him, lifting them up at the crescendo of his oli, his voice stirring up sounds from someplace deep within the earth, like the growl of a volcano liberating the music of rumbling pōhaku.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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