

Losing Our Heads

GREGORY PŌMAIKA'I GUSHIKEN

This piece is a critical reflection that discusses the ways my Kanaka Maoli grandfather passed in a car accident in the 1980s. I rewrite the autopsy that reported his cause of death, showing that it was more than just a single, tragic moment. By reflecting on his death, I attempt to construct an understanding of the ways in which colonialism interpellates Hawaiians into the role of the “bad” Hawaiian and how we enact these interpellations—not because we choose to, but because we are forced.

Date & Time: Monday, April 14th, 1980 at approximately 8:33 PM

Location: Nānākuli, O‘ahu approximately 1500 feet past the Kahe Power Plant, immediately before Nānākuli Town.

Description: Driving Westbound on Farrington Highway, the victim, due to intoxication as indicated by posthumous assessment, lost consciousness while operating the vehicle causing it to break through the guardrail and collide with the adjacent rock wall. The speed at which the vehicle struck the wall, in addition to the angle at which it struck, caused the victim to be thrown out of the vehicle through the driver-side window. Autopsy has determined that the ultimate cause of death was internal decapitation. The victim was not wearing a seatbelt.

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I used to think about it, the idea of decapitation, a lot. At the time I didn't know why, but when my grandmother would scold me about wearing my seat belt, the topic would always come up. "Eh, Pōmaika'i, you goin lose your head!" she would scold in her deep pidgin, from the driver's seat of her Ford Bronco, as I spiritedly squirmed out of the snug embrace of my seat belt. I always thought that the malihi ghosts of the polyester safety belt, which had this rigid way of locking itself in place if you pulled too hard, would strangle me, but my grandmother, like all Hawai'i mothers, was staunch in her instruction, so I obediently buckled the strap firmly across my chest, securing myself in the embrace of the rattling iron carriage, knowing that my fear of strangulation would be better than the loss of my body.

I understood the consequences of car safety well because of these scoldings, especially the importance of a po'ō, but it wasn't until much later that I understood the idea of "*internal decapitation*"—that there didn't need to be a guillotine and executioner for someone to lose their head, that familiar feeling of self and life and all that comes from it—and why it was such a concern to my grandma. Likewise, the strangling feeling I often feared in the back seat of my grandma's clanking wheels haunted my head with questions as the space between my chest and my eyes grew larger. After all, strangulation is just the deprivation of air to the body, which, like decapitation, can sever the ties between our heads ripe with resurgent conviction, hearts full with aspirations, and the histories buried between them that make us whole. For one reason or another, the idea fascinated me. When you gaze upon the body of someone who has died due to internal decapitation or strangulation, you don't see sutures or cloth or surgical tape; you see the solemn face of death itself, beautiful in the most frustrating of ways, or at least that's how my mother would

have seen it at her father's funeral. You would have no idea that this person's death certificate reads, "cause of death was internal decapitation," or "cause of death was strangulation."

Internal decapitation is known as "atlanto-occipital dislocation" in the discourses of doctors whose skin does not strike contrast against the maddening whiteness of their coats. Their reports detail the microbiology of loss and the anthropology of accidents with such detail that words become just significations of forgotten paths to breathe. They told my grandma that her husband died that evening because the oxygen that passed between his palms and to his dark-brown corneas had ceased to do so, and that his head had ceased to be a part of his body. But between the tears, a lāhui knows that the internal decapitation of my grandfather occurred long before that chilled April night. And the more I read and reread his death certificate, the less this government-certified document makes sense. Again and again, I am torn back to the final scene of the crash as the Wai'anae mountains stared down in resignation at the lifeless body of yet another Kanaka cut off from its nurturing embrace, another Kanaka destroyed by the vicious cycle of colonial capital and capitalist colonialism. They said that he died that night because his head was removed from his body, but none of the coroners who examined him could have even known that there are those whose heads are taken from their unsuspecting bodies long before they lie lifeless on an iron table under synthetic lights. We call ourselves Kānaka Maoli.

James MacShane Hanakahi, Jr. was my grandfather, and he could have been described as any or all the following: one of "da boys," a hard worker, an alcoholic, a workaholic, a father, a Christian, an abuser, an athlete, a victim, a homeowner, a welfare recipient, a Hawaiian. Spending

his childhood torn from one place to the next, from the now-demolished Damon Tract to Wai'anae to Waipahu, his life as a Kanaka in an island paradise, betrayed by the world he grew up in, was wrought with incensing images of lazy, perverted, savage Hawaiians.

He could not escape this image, even in the grand hall of mirrors ride at the 50th State Fair. His family could not afford the fair. I'm not saying that they couldn't afford the greasy, smoldering hot dogs and the sugar-laden, deep-fried distractions. I'm saying that the price of humanity, the price of being present, the price of being able to embrace the true meaning of aloha, was too high a price. By aloha, I don't mean the touristy gimmicks that I'm forced to regurgitate at part-time jobs to survive in a system that doesn't even understand what "aloha" means. What I'm saying is, the price of looking into the eyes of our kūpuna and finding something—anything, really—to hint at our legitimacy, our history, our validity, was just too damn high for Kānaka like my grandfather to even dream of.

But this story isn't about him. It isn't about me, either. This is about how the system cuts off our heads before we can even become another tragedy for KHON to report on the nine o'clock news, just so the media can talk more about the "war on drugs," which is really a war on Hawaiians.

Date & Time: Monday, April 14th, 1980 at approximately 8:33 PM

Location: Nānākuli, O'ahu ~~approximately 1500 feet past the Kahe Power Plant, immediately before Nānākuli Town~~ *at the intersection of pulsating blue badges, silent scarlet sirens, and the scent of snow-white dread, approximately 1,500 feet past the black smoke of Kahe Power Plant that softly strangles the surrounding ocean.*

Description: Driving Westbound on Farrington Highway, the victim, due to ~~to intoxication~~ *colonization* as indicated by posthumous assessment, lost consciousness while operating the vehicle causing it to break through the guardrail and collide with the adjacent rock wall. The speed at which the vehicle struck the wall, in addition to the angle at which it struck, caused the victim to be thrown out of the vehicle through the driver-side window. Autopsy has determined that the ultimate cause of death was ~~internal decapitation~~. *a burning need in the back of the victim's palms to be validated and affirmed by a system that would do neither.* The victim was not wearing a seatbelt.

With unbearable pressure from his haole bosses, along with the unending pile of bills on the linoleum kitchen counter, it seemed that anything could put my grandfather over the edge. With threats of being fired and criticism of him by his father, every entrance to James's home was adorned with cracks to the head and, if it was a particularly bad day, threats with a gun.

However, this was nothing compared to his sister's reality. Their father had raped James's sister just days after my great-grandmother had left. I often assume, when trying to make sense of the very same beatings my grandfather delivered to my mother and grandmother, that James was haunted by his early memories of abuse and betrayal at home. But I digress. Making sense out of madness never seems to work, and there's no way to really know what my papa James had experienced.

In any case, on April 13, 1980, the day before his last, my grandfather received and then delivered his obligatory beatings like on any other day—first, from his haole bosses; second, to his wife and daughters. With pressure from the US military, the construction company



demanded longer hours, harder work and, sometimes, less pay. It seems evident that when the US military is involved, the reasonable becomes the impossible, and I guess the same happens in the domestic sphere of those workers whose lives are lived through time cards and paychecks.

For my grandfather, even the smallest speck of the previous night's rice stuck on his fork at breakfast would prompt a violent beating of anything that could be beaten. That day was one of those times. He raised his fists again and again, maddeningly increasing the pressure at which he struck. My mother curled into a ball on ground that was almost as cold and hard as the hole in her father's heart. The cold pierced through generations, into mine. Transitioning from blows by fists to the bluntness of a frying pan, he swung and swung until crimson red waterfalls came gushing out of my mother's nose and mouth, rivers that would flow through my wounds years later. When he stormed out of the house, it was as though a hurricane had come and passed. For now, the family was safe, and that was all that mattered.

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Most of what happened to my grandfather between this point and the moment of his death is unknown to me, but I would learn years later from my mother—as she lay broken on the kitchen floor after being beaten by her second husband—that the last thing she thought of her father before his death was, “I hope he dies. I hope he just leaves. I hope this just stops.”

The thing about these cycles of violence is that they don't stop. They just keep spinning around and around until

somebody breaks into a million little pieces. They say that daughters seek out lovers who are like their fathers, and I guess that explains everything that needs to be said about me, my mother, and him—James MacShane Hanakahi, Jr.

As I scan the death certificate over and over, jet black text becomes incomprehensible markings on blank space. In the back of my mind, I reimagine the moments leading up to the accident. Covered in that film of sweat that accumulates after laboring relentlessly for hours in the piercing hot sun, James paces the outskirts of the construction site, awaiting the signal from his haole supervisor to finally leave. He was supposed to be done several hours ago.

His contracts to build housing on US military bases that strike the 'āina of his ancestors burn. Frustrated, but too fearful and too weary to protest, he stares into the gold-orange glow of the setting sun, imagining the fantastic sight of a green flash, much different from the green flashes of cash that would appear in his checking account. The boss okays him to leave the already pitch-black construction site. He gets into his truck. Not knowing it's his last, he gulps down one of the beers from the six-pack he just bought at 7-11.

Buzzed but not drunk, tired but not dead, grandfather makes a trek that would be his last. Speeding past the bleak emptiness of what would later become Kapolei town, and scraping past the turn that would someday become Ko'olina, he accelerates past Kahe Power Plant in an effort to get home just a little faster so he can get just a bit more sleep, before he loses just a little more of his dignity when he goes back to work the next morning. Then it hits him. No, it's not an epiphany, because epiphanies are only for men of a certain

variety: White, wealthy, and educated. What hits James is a wall, the stone cold wall he had driven by every day of his working life. The wall that the bus, packed with young, “industrious” Hawaiian men, grazed as they were whisked away to fight for a country not their own. He had just driven past the very same wall this morning, and it would become the one thing that meant he could never pass anything ever again.

This is where it gets gruesome. I imagine my grandfather in his last moments, his two hands grasping the wheel, his toes curling as he attempts, pathetically, to exert enough force on the brake to stop the car. Then he realizes it is too late. The wall is right there. His seat belt is off, and his window wide open. I wonder: Was he afraid? Was he relieved? Was he happy? It eats at me, but there is no way I can ever know. His body is thrown out of the vehicle as it collides with the wall, and with the snap of his neck, his life is over, just like that. It’s over.

But I still ask myself, “Is it really over?”

It can’t be, because the suffering isn’t even close to being over. What if every strike, every abuse, every evil word that left his mouth wasn’t his? What if there were just some way to explain it all? This suffering cannot be without cause. It lives on, even to this day. It lives in the angry fists met by impoverished Hawaiian children, and in the cycles of abuse that spin through generations. It lives on in its original form, its first sin. It lives on through a legacy of colonialism in the islands.

The truth is that each abuse, each incensed fit that he threw, was caused by something greater. When we, as Hawaiians, live in a world where we are not allowed to connect with our land and determine, for ourselves, how and why we live on this earth, we cannot find peace

and harmony in the chaos of loss. The truth is, no matter how hard I try to conduct this posthumous reflection on my grandfather, these unheard liturgies will never reach him. So, what can come of them? Perhaps, I muse, these quiet reflections on my grandfather’s abuse and death will mollify that unspeakable trauma each Kanaka carries on their back.

For it is not until we recognize the construct of colonialism and the way it turns Hawaiians—who must be connected to our ‘āina—into agents

of capitalist production and radically self-destructive consumption, that we can finally say the word “ea” and know that it means not just sovereignty or saliently silencing logics but also breath, filling our strangled lungs and severed esophaguses with life.

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James MacShane Hanakahi is my grandfather. He had no obituary, but I often try to write one in my head. He lived his life with honest intentions, faltered by the economic and political dominance of White supremacy. In an irrational world, people do irrational things to survive. Succumbing to alcoholism, drug addiction, inhumane working conditions, and the loss of love and mercy, he was one of those people. Like another statistic in a campaign to quantify, to classify, and to deconstruct our bodies, his death, and my death, and all of our deaths may be just another cog in the campaign’s argumentative machines, whose sole purpose is to snap the iwikuamo‘o that binds our cosmic heads to our earthly bodies. I know this imperialist tale is carried by cold, wet feet as they trace the maddeningly modular drainage canals that pass through Moihihī, meeting their abrupt end at the gaze of Nānāikapono Elementary



School where innocence, too, is not spared. I hear its colonial call as clearly as the words “unexploded ordnance” leaving a haole military officer’s mouth on the shores of Kaho‘olawe. Still, senseless death in my settled bones reeks with the sickening smell of discomfort and disillusion. Blinded by the blaring lights, and muted by echoing red sirens that tell of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi failure, I picked apart each bone, begging for some semblance of sense in the chaos, only to find in this dissection the continued decapitation of my identity, my understanding, and my intellect.

WE ARE BORN DISJOINTED, DISCONNECTED FROM OUR HISTORIES AND OUR MO‘OKŪ‘AUHAU

And, yet, in this vindictive blame, I realize that these searing brutalities do not die with the ending of a single life. No, these scarred histories of violence and fear, perpetuated by this systematic cycle of colonizing and corrupting, are not exclusive to a certain type of Hawaiian, a certain type of man, a certain mode of being. No, it is not that we are “bad,” or that we are “dirty,” or that we are “savage”; it is because when we are born, with the cutting of our umbilical cords, so too are our heads severed by the Western stamps on English-only birth certificates. Dangling from the warm embrace of our mothers, our ‘āina momona, we are born disjointed, disconnected from our histories and our mo‘okū‘auhau that cradle us in their knowledge.

But losing our heads does not mean losing our lives. No, it means so much more and so much less than that. In this carnivorous channel of colonization, we are fed lies

as truths and told to be the ideal, “good” and “industrious” young men and women in homage to the Western imperialist memories placed in our minds. We are headless, obediently following each name they brand us with, stumbling through foreign halls, speaking tongues unknown to our still dangling heads. We are left with a body without a soul, a heart without a beat. And, yet, in this dismal discord, there is still hope for us, as a Kanaka Maoli collective, to understand and overcome these vast fears and this deep dread.

Only in radical acts of recognition can we begin to undo these egregious acts of decapitation and displacement. Embracing and encapsulating this persistent fear of the petty performativity of “bad” in our native bones compels us to fight back and find our way to an oceanic pathway where our earthbound bodies can finally meet the lost celestial constellations of our heads. In sorrows as deep as the channels that separate and subjugate our island horizons, there lies a truth more profound than the senseless transgressions against Hawaiians by Hawaiians—it is called colonization. As a child, I often blamed my papa for his actions, believing that such egregious acts could be understood only through the lens of a Christian construct of evil. What I did not realize is that true evil comes with each utterance of culture, “knowledge,” and “progress” that this foreign force buries into the soil of our chests. This colonial construction of failure and of fear shaped me into its subject—good, industrious and, most importantly, obedient to its ideals.

And in this wild and weary conglomerate of conflicted feelings, I realize that this recognition, this seeing, this feeling, is so much more than just blindly absorbing tales of 2:00 a.m. beatings and 9:00 p.m. car crashes. It is recognizing the trickle of hatred and anger that comes from the beating of our brown bodies into Western

submission; it is the act of finally seeing the colonial roots of green bottles and jail cells; it is opening our eyes to the supreme force that colonial forces bear on our people. It is, in short, *lāhui*—seeing ourselves and seeing each other. And seeing is more than just that—it is writing, it is speaking. I write these words with the intention of posthumously sewing back what was taken from my Papa Jimmy. I write these words to stitch together a broken *lāhui*. And, above all else, I pull together these ropes of resistance in hopes of remembering and recognizing myself. For, although I am not James MacShane Hanakahi, I am his namesake. I am his *mo'opuna*, and our *mo'okū'auhau* are one. I keep my head in close orbit to my grounded body, slowly repairing and healing these scars and severed veins so that I can at least

rewrite this recurring obituary. And if I could finally do that, I guess it would go something like:

Though they say we are gone, we are never forgotten, and we carry with us the scars of our ancestors, and we carry with us the hope that they had for us, and in this immense weight we recognize that we are not perfect and that our *kūpuna* have hurt us in ways unspeakable and that they have beat us and raped us and ruined us but we also recognize that the world inflicts these same pains upon those that came before us and we realize and reconcile these differences and we know that although our *kūpuna* lost their heads, we will not lose ours.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gregory Pōmaika'i Gushiken is a Kanaka Maoli writer and PhD student in ethnic studies at the University of California–San Diego, where he writes about the Kanaka Maoli diaspora in Las Vegas and Southern California. He is an alumnus of the English and political science departments at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.