Re-membering Māhū Is a Love Letter to Creation

Donavan Kamakani Albano

This love letter is a collection of four poems: "a māhū erasure poem," "Duplex (On Māhū Erasure)," "Moku," and "A Love Letter to Creation." It meditates on the generative pairing—severing and re-membering—within the māhū ʻŌiwi body. Severing: reckoning with colonial dysphoria and silence / Re-membering: the ʻono, the erotic, the shapeshifters. This project collectively seeks to re-member that māhū is a love letter to creation—embodied through the erasure, duplex, fragment, and epistolary poetic forms. An artist statement accompanies the poems.

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mā.hū [*Hawaiian Dictionary* (1986) (Pukui-Elbert)]
n. Homosexual, of either sex; hermaphrodite. Hoʻomā.hū: to behave like a homosexual or hermaphrodite. (PEP maa(f,s)uu.)

mahū [*Hawaiian Dictionary* (1986) (Pukui-Elbert)]
vs. Weak, flat, as diluted kava or stale beer; insipid, as fresh poi kept too long in the icebox; quiet, peaceful, undisturbed. Cf. mahūmahū. (PPN mafu(u).)

māhu [*Hawaiian Dictionary* (1986) (Pukui-Elbert)]
1. nvs. Steam, vapor, fumes; to steam, exude vapor. Lola māhu hana alanui, steam roller for streets. Hoʻo.māhu: to create steam; to cook or soften food by steam; to steam.
2. Same as ʻōlapa, trees.

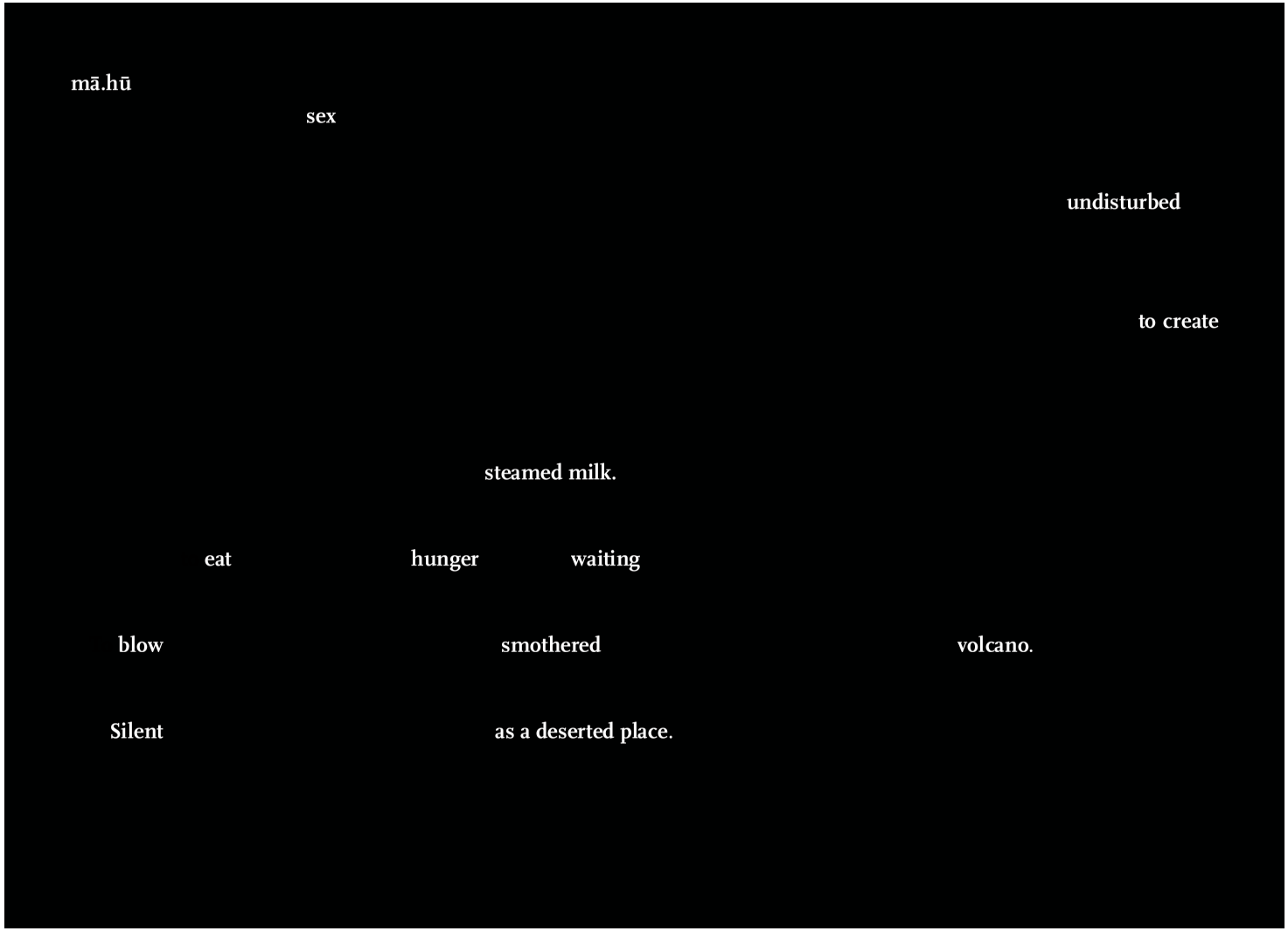
Māhu [*Māmaka Kaiao* (2003) (Kōmike Huaʻōlelo)]
Kokoleka me ka waiū māhu. Chocolate with steamed milk.

-mahu [*Hawaiian Dictionary* (1986) (Pukui-Elbert)]
Hoʻomahu: to eat just a little to allay hunger, as while waiting for a feast.

MA-HU [*A Dictionary of the Hawaiian Language* (1865) (Andrews)]
v. To blow out steam or smoke; to smoke, as a smothered fire; to throw out hot vapor, as from a volcano.

MA-HU [*A Dictionary of the Hawaiian Language* (1865) (Andrews)]
adj. Silent; indisposed to conversation; silent, as a deserted place.

MA-HU [*A Dictionary of the Hawaiian Language* (1865) (Andrews)]
s. A man who assimilates his manners and dresses his person like a woman.
2. A hermaphrodite; a eunuch.


mā.hū
sex
undisturbed
to create
steamed milk.
eat
hunger
waiting
blow
smothered
volcano.
Silent
as a deserted place.

DUPLEX (ON MĀHŪ ERASURE)

after Billy-Ray Belcourt after Jericho Brown

A māhū poem is a **hunger, waiting.**
It waits like **vapor** from **a deserted place.**

> I write from **vapor** of **a deserted place**,
> where **steamed milk** emits from **a volcano.**

Love tastes like **steamed milk** from his **volcano**
—as in his armpit. **Silent** moan. **(un)disturbed**.

> Shapeshifting in the **silent**. **undisturbed** breaths.
> A **smothered** mother tongue reduced to a **sex.**

How can I have **sex** with a **smothered** mouth?
A mouth that wants **to eat**, but nothing **to blow**.

> **To blow** him is **to eat** that which feeds. E wai.
> ʻāina: **to create** / **assimilate** fucks me.

assimilate: consent? Māhū: **to create**.
A māhū poem is a **hunger**, **waiting**.

MOKU

where is queer non-

poem grief hanu joy body

my sovereignty euphoria fucking

boy scales hairy love

binary stream ocean him

ea aloha protector enough

I'm not mirror boy

moʻo chest pain shedding skin body

aloha piko kaumaha

armpit hā PTSD Kalihi

mana fucking stolen

fake fucking skin

womb fucking ocean homeless

island body fucking water

LOVE LETTER TO CREATION

your aloha: how the earth & sky rubbed
and birthed the Koʻolau mountains protected

by clouds formed from the water vapored
from your skin, i once knew a rain

flattening heads & slicing them with an adze
hidden atop the mountains from the oceanside,

i was nearsighted. today, i am protected by a rain teaching
how to listen deeply. a wahine transformed

by Hiʻiaka's touch & gifted everlasting life to spread
her aloha across the leaf buds of koa trees.

you fill my ocean eyes with mauna mist
rise up against me, gently, at ahiahi.

three thousand stars draped across your
mother tongue where we meet at those very mountains

they thought they could separate us forever.
but they did not ask for permission to open

the door that only presents itself to the one
who dares to ask the question:

when does a door grant permission
to enter? offer hoʻokupu & ceremony first.

e Kānehoalani ē / aloha kāua
i am regenerated into ao inside

refracted onto your twinkling retina,
the shapeshifting is no match for your vision.

i return to pō
they thought they could separate us forever but

who knew that a heavenly wind could
make such sweet love to a constellation?

my sweet Kāneʻohe,
your aloha: defiance, remembering body

viscerality—a memory of bloods and waters
and names often misjudged by hawaiian men.

your aloha: dismantles, remembering aloha
can never be straight; kin as in a body

of water: a fluid ocean womb that birthed the first
coral, Hinaʻōpūhalakoʻa femmes Kanaloa at the core.

your aloha: disruption, remembering mountain
and sea, like the earth and sky, are inseparable

lovers who dare to ai the sacred stones.
our aloha: remembering māhū

is a love letter
to creation.

From Love Letters: An Artist Statement

Aloha mai kākou e kuʻu māhūi,

I come from love letters buried within iwi from ʻIhikapalaumaewa to Oʻahualua, Philippines to Puerto Rico, and elsewhere. I come from a love letter that bestowed upon me the kuleana to carry the name Kamakani later in my life. I come from a beautiful collection of letters that burned in a brush fire. Another stolen. Another Hawaiʻi reduced to a statistic. I come from love letters that orated generations of moʻokūʻauhau, mele, and oli.

I write love letters because my kūpuna wrote them. I write love letters because it is the first poem my mother taught me. I write love letters to resist erasure as dysphoria stares directly at my face. *Māhū*, it yells from the mirror. I write love letters to resist *our* foretold disappearance in the apocalyptic imagination.[1] It is a radical and political choice: a refusal of cyclical death; a refusal to remain severed. Here, I write epistles as an act upon the severed māhū ʻŌiwi body that desires to love itself as to re-member that māhū is a love letter to creation. Meaning that to love, I must re-member my pilina to my own māhū ʻŌiwi body—so that I may fully embody it. Through the epistolary form, I make tender love to ʻāina. So salty, so ʻono.

o o o o

> "I am both the creator of, and the listener to, my own stories, making applicable and relevant my own knowledge as a means of laying claim to my own body, making sovereign my stories."
>
> —Joshua Whitehead, "Writing as a Rupture" in *Making Love with the Land*

We first met in the rupture.

Can we make sovereign our stories, together?

I want us to weave stories of severing and re-membering, where making claims to our bodies recognizes loss as worldmaking and worldbreaking, and love as slow, reciprocal expressions of gratitude—

—As in consensual lovemaking is how we weave stories.

—As in making love with ʻāina is an additional layer of protection.

—As in naming trauma and pleasure in the same breath is an act of decolonization. I want us to weave stories of aloha and kaumaha, where making claims to our bodies means we choose to breathe life for those under the rubble, reckon with the dysphoria, and confront the frustration—

—As in silence is a love language.

—As in moku denotes that which is severed is an island; that which is broken is a vessel / a kumu / a lover / a healer / land / water / genealogy / a body, or many bodies.

—As in mother denotes grief, trigger, relief, ocean, release, and best friend.

o o o o

In this moʻolelo mana māhū, I specifically ruminate on a severed māhū ʻŌiwi body—through colonial dysphoria, from the dictionary to the island—and on silence. And I re-member the erotic—in ʻāina, culture, and between māhū ʻŌiwi bodies—as a movement towards desire/home. To be sure, I created and now share *Re-membering Māhū Is a Love Letter to Creation*, a collection of four poems that work to re-member māhū as a pilina ʻŌiwi and poetry as embodiment.

Re-membering Māhū Is a Love Letter to Creation is a multipronged meditation on severing and re-membering—not as a binary (fuck binaries)—but as generative storying that returns the māhū ʻŌiwi body to its kuleana, its multiplicities, its shapeshifting abilities.

Because I want to create poetry that is a decolonial embodiment.

Because I study poetry that is decolonial, anti-imperialist, and so fucking gay.

o o o o

No‘ukahau‘oli Revilla (2019) writes that “shapeshifting is not ignoring trauma or burying trauma. Shapeshifting is a way of cultivating breath, taking space from trauma in order to clarify, cleanse, and heal” (p. 65).[2] Like my body, like the lines in “Duplex (Notes on Māhū Erasure),” these poems are shapeshifters—meaning they possess the ability to change form, as this project has. This definition provides important context to understanding the role of shapeshifting when the body has been severed—as a valid, important tool for healing.

I move beyond māhū as a gender or sexual identity. Rather, I connect to māhū as an *active* pilina ‘Ōiwi—a necessary and unapologetic part of the “‘upena of intimacies” that Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio (2021) describes.[3] Māhū, is, indeed, an *intimacy*—a remembering of desire and kuleana. As Ka‘imina‘auao Kahikina (2024) asserts, māhū is, indeed, an *embodiment*—as in *identity* is insufficient.[4] Māhū is a capacious weaving of lei.

o o o o

“a māhū erasure poem” admits frustration with the insufficiency of the English translations in the Hawaiian dictionary. This poem is not intended to dismiss mana‘o from our kūpuna, as there must be a recognition of the temporal and heteropatriarchal context within which these definitions are situated (Kahikina, 2024). Rather, it seeks to articulate a feeling (or an interlocking group of emotions) of frustration by the definition of māhū as reduced to sexuality that is insufficient for me, today. From this poem emerges a personal struggle with epistemological dissonance—a struggle between the Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian worldviews; a struggle between desiring ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i of the body and grieving of loss; a struggle between the body and colonial heteropatriarchy.

The duplex is a poetic form invented by poet Jericho Brown that is simultaneously a ghazal, a sonnet, and a blues poem, engaging the body in multiple traditions.[5] Remembering a Kanaka ‘Ōiwi tradition, **“Duplex (On Māhū Erasure)”**[6] invites pīna‘i. According to ku‘ualoha ho‘omanawanui (2014), pīna‘i denotes formulaic repetition: “a traditional oral and literary rhetorical device considered a highly desirable quality in oral storytelling, a stylistic element linking the mo‘olelo to its oral roots” (p. 76).[7] This duplex attempts a call-and-response between the severed and the re-membered, the grief and desire. It asks: *Where is the consent? What am I ‘ono for?* It yearns to return to Joshua Whitehead’s (2022) words, “I must remember that a story can be eaten like a body” (p. 85).[8]

Omi Salas-SantaCruz (2022), a trans Latinx scholar, describes colonial dysphoria as "a deep-seated psychological, emotional, and existential fatigue stemming from the incessant need to have one's body and identity interpreted through the lens of colonial, white, Anglo and Eurocentric perspectives" (p. 1357).[9] **"Moku"** honors the body in an expression of the fragment, specifically through the body that is experiencing colonial dysphoria. In it, the fragment is not a site of worldbreaking, but of the potentiality for hulihia; a movement toward naming, reckoning, and healing. It is meant to be orated. This poem would eventually tell me it needed to shed its skin at the muliwai.[10]

Haunani-Kay Trask (1986) articulates a "feminist eros" as "unleash[ing] a desire—for creative expression, especially in the areas of sexuality and work; for balance among needs, particularly those of autonomy and nurturance; for sharing and interdependence without bondage" (p. 94).[11] Further, Revilla (2019) defines "erotic sovereignty" as follows: "If sovereignty is the right to govern oneself, then erotic sovereignty is the right to govern one's body in relation to desire and belonging" (p. 19).[12] I wanted to write a sex scene. Because I come from love letters and have been taught the importance of gratitude as front-facing, **"A Love Letter to Creation"** is gratitude towards erotics, desires, intimacies & moʻokūʻauhau. It is a reminder to honor by asking for permission.[13] Writing this poem is an act of erotic sovereignty—without bondage today. Erotic sovereignty is something we should embrace and fight for. We must insist upon it, so that we may continue living, breathing, remembering, loving, desiring, and consensually fucking. And we must be careful. Through this project, I am reminded that trauma and pleasure can co-exist. Hānau ka ʻuku koʻakoʻa. Specifically, this is an ode to my Kāneʻohe, Makaliʻi, who reminds me that Indigenous joy, like māhū, is an embodiment. It is also a love letter to creation stories, home, and protection. No ka māhūi.

Since these poems were first written, they have continued to shapeshift into new forms. The versions presented here reflect one moment in that continuing transformation.

> E kuʻu māhūi, I write this love letter to you
> in hopes that you know that our bodies
> are a love letter to creation. May we
> write more love letters.[14]

Ke aloha nō,
Kamakani

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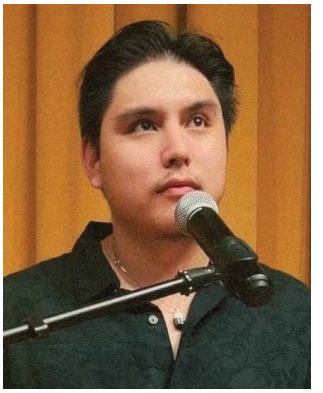
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About the Author



Donavan Kamakani Albano is a māhū ʻŌiwi from Kāneʻohe, Oʻahu, with genealogical ties to Maui. Raised in Kalihilihiolaumiha, they hold an MA in Indigenous politics and a BA in ethnic studies from the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa. Their work appears in *Poetry Northwest*, *Pasefika Presence*, and *Chapter House Journal*. A 2026 finalist for the James Welch Prize for Indigenous Poets and nominated for Best New Poets, Kamakani has received fellowships, scholarships, and support from Indigenous Nations Poets and the McCormack Writing Center.

Notes

1 Mahalo e Vanessa for making me more ʻono to create love letters. See "The Final Boss: A Poetics of World-Building in the Apocalyptic Imagination" (Villarreal, 2024).

2 Mahalo e Noʻu for this gift to queer ʻŌiwi, for reminding me to prioritize aloha, gratitude, and tenderness. Reader, please note that I do not position shapeshifting specifically in the context within a moʻo poetics as Noʻu does in this project. I am, still, reflecting on the craft of māhū ʻŌiwi poetics, which I will explore further in a future project. See also Revilla (2022).

3 Mahalo e Heoli for the invitation to remember that which feeds and that which I am ʻono for, and for the language to cite with care.

4 Mahalo e Kaʻiminaʻauao for this gift to the māhūi, for the words and affirmation of the personal and political complexities. Your words, like art, are beautiful and pleasurable.

5 Brown's duplex is first used in *The Tradition* (2019a). The naming rationale and boundaries of a duplex are shared in this blog post (Brown, 2019b). Mahalo e Jericho for the gift of repetition, for allowing me to remember several traditions—including my own as a Kanaka ʻŌiwi.

6 Mahalo e Billy-Ray for "Is there a heaven for mother tongues?," "The future's a bed of dawn I plant fists in," and for helping to find love in loneliness. This poem is after Billy-Ray Belcourt after Jericho Brown. See Belcourt (2019, p. 111).

7 Mahalo e kuʻualoha for the reminder to return to moʻolelo and ʻike Hawaiʻi.

8 Mahalo e Joshua for inviting me to meet you at the rupture, and for affirming my frustrations around form and genre. See Whitehead (2022, p. 85).

9 Colonial dysphoria is first coined by Omi Salas-SantaCruz in their dissertation, "Learning to Be: Trans-Latinidad, Race, Indigeneity, and Inclusion" (2022). In Salas-SantaCruz's "Colonial Dysphoria" (2024), they further define colonial dysphoria as "distress [that] arises from the restrictive narratives and identities imposed by colonial systems, which obscure modes of self-knowledge and existential realities" (p. 7). Although this term is used to describe an experience of transgender individuals of color specifically, I do not equate māhū with transgender, as

those are articulations of relationships in two different worldviews—a Hawaiian worldview and non-Hawaiian worldview (see Kahikina, 2024). It is precisely this "incessant need to have one's body and identity interpreted through the lens of colonial, white, Anglo and Eurocentric perspectives" (Salas-SantaCruz, 2025) that is a struggle I deeply resonate with and explore in these poems. Mahalo e Omi Salas-SantaCruz for the gift of the ability to name.

10 See "Like a Kahawai," first published by *Poetry Northwest* (2025). https://www.poetrynw.org/poetry/like-a-kahawai/

11 Mahalo e Kumu Haunani-Kay for inviting me to unleash the desire, and for helping me to see transformation in light and darkness.

12 Mahalo e Noʻu for helping me find the words.

13 I am inspired by Danez Smith's articulation of the volta in a sonnet as "a door that is opening somewhere in the poem." See Chicago Humanities (2017, 28:23-28:35). Mahalo e Danez for helping me return to blood; for "tonight, prisons turn to tulips / & prisoner means *one who dances in a yellow field*" (Smith, 2017, 79).

14 Dear reader: Much like white space, notes are generative pauses to breathe; to express gratitude; to honor ʻike kūpuna, intellectual genealogies, and mentor authors. Mahalo e Noʻu for reminding me that gratitude deserves our time and for your kōkua. It is an honor to work with you.

Mahalo e Heoli, Ākea, and the Kamehameha Publishing ʻohana for holding space for this project that needed to shapeshift. Mahalo e nā kumu a me nā hoa papa for witnessing and caring. Mahalo e nā kūpuna, e nā mākua, e nā ʻaumākua.

Mahalo e kuʻu ʻohana—especially Chazelle, Donmar, Levi, and Dad—for holding me as I grow into my full, authentic self. Mahalo e kuʻu ʻohana no Kāneʻohe for welcoming me. Mahalo e Aunty Napualei for your aloha and time to walaʻau.

Mahalo e kuʻu Makaliʻi for turning me to joy, always. Mom, you are my first love letter. Aloha nō e Kalihilihiolaumiha me Kāneʻohe me Mauinuiakama. Naʻu me ka mahalo.