

Roots and Wonder

E Hawai‘i a Keawe, Maui a Kamalālāwalu, Molokai nui a Hina, Lāna‘i a Kaululā‘au, O‘ahu a Kakuhihewa, Kaua‘i a Manōkalanipō, Ni‘ihau a Kahelelani, ko‘u po‘e hoahānau o Moananuiākea, nā hoaloha i hele a kama‘āina, a me nā pua mai nā ‘āina ē e kipa mai, aloha mai kākou. My ancestral roots are in Ho‘okena, Hawai‘i, but I blossomed in Mākaha, here on O‘ahu.

When I woke up this morning, I dedicated my first thoughts to imagining a sustainable future, and my mind took me on an unexpected journey, a journey about the wonders of creation. What immediately came to mind were images of my children when they were nestled in my womb, rooted to me through an umbilical cord, and sustained by my body. And then, I thought about our great cosmogonic genealogies that inform my and my fellow Hawaiians’ identity. Embedded in these genealogies is the understanding of the Hawaiian Island world—sky, land, sea, gods, humans, and everything else therein— as a web of interconnected and genealogically related elements. In other words, Hawaiians perceive the world genealogically. The Hawaiian word for genealogy is mo‘okū‘auhau.

In its narrowest sense, mo‘okū‘auhau refers to biological lineage, but as a Hawaiian theoretical and philosophical construct, mo‘okū‘auhau stands for relationality. Mo‘okū‘auhau includes intellectual, conceptual, and aesthetic genealogies; even more importantly, mo‘okū‘auhau is chronologically plural, extending in vertical, horizontal, and diagonal directions through time. And in terms of intellectual endeavors, mo‘okū‘auhau refers to the worldview we have inherited as Hawaiians, which informs how we conceive, reason about and understand thought and artistic production. An intellectual mo‘okū‘auhau refers to a person’s genealogy of knowledge—how knowledge has been generated, learned, and passed on. And mo‘okū‘auhau also refers to genealogies of power, and the capacity to effect change. Related to kuleana, or our

set of rights and responsibilities, these considerations are enmeshed in the historical struggles that characterize the sum of Hawaiian experience—past and present. And as an aesthetic construct, mo‘okū‘auhau refers to poetic devices we have inherited that inform and guide our artistic-intellectual expression.

Examining the cultural significance, rhetorical strategies, and aesthetics of our intellectual-artistic production can offer us insights into the embodied reality of being Hawaiian and a deeper appreciation for the poetics of Hawaiian art—verbal, kinetic, and visual. And while art is intensely emotional and profoundly creative, as we all know, art can be deeply political. Accessing the ancestral knowledge embedded in our belief narratives is an important part of creating a future where we are at the center. This includes reclaiming our aesthetic sovereignty: empowering ourselves through creative expressions rooted in our ways of knowing and being. When I think about our future, I think about continuity in the face of changes and challenges. Our future is rooted in indigenous ways of knowing and being, where the past, present, and future intertwine.

Note: Excerpts from this talk are taken from my book *Facing the Spears of Change: The Life and Legacy of John Papa ‘Ī‘Ī*, forthcoming in May 2016 with University of Hawai‘i Press.