

# Dear Reader

## Making the Value of Hawai‘i Together

**Aiko Yamashiro**

In the end the value of Hawai‘i cannot be determined by one person alone. Here I can only share what it means to me, and that I want to sit and hear you share what it means to you. If we do that over and over again with many people, maybe then we’ll know.

Dawn Mahi, “Kalihi Calls”

*The Value of Hawai‘i 2: Ancestral Roots, Oceanic Visions*

Dear Reader,

I want you to know that this book was hard to write. Some of the essays we were hoping for could not be written, because the world was too fast and loud and sad to get words down. Some of the essays in here almost did not get written because these days some of us find it difficult to get out of bed, and some of us find it difficult to stop moving long enough to write.

As an editor, I have had the privilege of being invited into the writing of many of these essays, and I got to learn where the ideas in this book come from. While sitting alone in my one bedroom in Ka‘alaea, while working on this book late at night with many of the authors, I have visited hot humid valleys and wide bays. Experienced songs and languages and dances I don’t know. Felt red dirt and cool fishpond waters, and cold hospital rooms. I have met grandparents, children, ‘āina, ancestors passed. I have met many of these authors’ *why*.

Sometimes we think that writing happens in isolation, in silence and concentration. Or that ideas and visions come out whole and fully formed. As an editor I want to make sure to tell you that the essays here about the value of Hawai‘i come from being together. From laughing and playing and crying and trying and struggling and living together—with other people and with ‘āina we love.

Each essay is full of voices, stories, and homes. They were written in response to and written with community. These essays were never meant to sit quietly in a book. They are an offering to us to move and share and create.

How can we make the value of Hawai‘i, together?

Writing and sharing poetry in group settings has taught me the power of saying words we mean, and really listening to each other. I have had the privilege of teaching poetry at UH Mānoa, in community settings, and at an after-school club at Castle High School, my alma mater. For teenagers, young adults, aunts, and uncles, poetry can be a way to express the worries we have about being a good friend or sibling or parent or partner. The dreams for our lives that excite us, and make us afraid too. The grief we feel when losing a loved one.

I have heard the tremble in a voice when saying something important out loud for the first time. I have experienced the absolute silence of a circle of people listening, who understand the weight of such a gift. When we say words we truly mean and listen to each other. When we can be vulnerable and open our whole souls. I think that is how we build trust, understanding, and stronger community together.

How can we make the value of Hawai‘i, together?

As artists, when we come together to create collaboratively, we must come without a clear end in sight. Not without purpose, but without a set answer. We must come a little open. Ready to learn, or change. This is the same way we come together to mālama ‘āina, or to fish or to make lei. This is the same way we go to visit a tūtū. Show up. Bring yourself, your gratitude, and a snack to share. We come to share our lives. We come ready for a genuine conversation.

I believe that genuine conversation can build community. I currently work at the Hawai‘i Council for the Humanities, a nonprofit with a commitment to creating public humanities programs—programs where we bring the powers of literature, culture, history, philosophy, and other human insights to bear upon and explore complicated and important questions about our lives. What do we value, and why? What does it mean to call Hawai‘i home? What futures can we dream of and create together?

Our mission is to connect people with ideas that enrich lives, broaden perspectives, and strengthen communities. One way we’ve been doing this is by holding community conversations called Try Think, a program that began as a humanities class in the O‘ahu correctional facilities. Some of its central beliefs are that *everyone matters, but not everyone feels they matter*, and *valuing our differences is what creates true safety*. We believe in creating spaces to connect with each other that are not spaces of debate or winning. Instead, we practice together how to listen and open ourselves to perspectives and experiences that are not our own. Creating a culture of genuine conversation—where every voice can be heard and considered—can lead to transformation. As a friend, poet, and former student reminded me recently, we can do great things once we trust ourselves and each other.

Being a good editor is about being a good listener. Completely opening to someone else’s story, and working with them to help them tell it in the clearest and

most powerful way. As one of four co-editors, I got to struggle deep in the stories of some of these authors, helping to shape them for this publication. One completely rewrote her piece after realizing who it was she really wanted to talk to. Not *about* them, but *to* them. Another told me he was too depressed to write anything, and then managed to tell a story that made me cry—with the force of not just his spirit, but all the people he wrote about, who he carries, who help support him.

Listening to these amazing authors and community members has reminded me that we are made in all our interactions, relationships, in our kuleana we have chosen and that have chosen us. We come to what we love and commit to, with our best talents. We come with all who have made us.

How can we make the value of Hawai'i, together?

It is the start of obon season as I write this—a time when the ancestors are visiting us to dance and eat and sing and remember together. Last night, I attended an online obon musical program put on by Ukwanshin Kabudan, along with ninety other people of different generations. The presenters play old songs that open up memories in everyone. Normally at this time, I would be following a bon dance circuit, going to different temples every weekend to eat fried noodles and musubi, and follow behind Japanese and Okinawan grandmas who remind me of mine who have passed. They shine in kimono and hapi coats decorated with leaves and flowers. My hands follow their hands—planting seeds, tilling soil, rounding the moon.

Norman Kaneshiro sensei is talking about the linguistic and cultural differences between the Okinawan word “chibariyo” and the Japanese word “ganbare.” *Ganbare* is about trying hard to overcome some external hardship, he explains. Of not yielding, even in intense difficulty. *Chibariyo* is different. It is about reaching deep inside to muster all that you are—your experiences, your culture, your ancestors, everything they taught you. This is a source of tremendous strength and energy in times of struggle. As the sanshin plays and the voices climb and fall, I think about what it means to stay open to the tremendous universe we each carry.

Dear Reader, thank you for listening to me. I want to hear you too. I will bring all of myself to this.

Let's make the value of Hawai'i together.

**Aiko Yamashiro** was raised in Kāne'ohe, O'ahu, and is lucky to live near enough to see her mother Aileen, brother Daniel, sister Amy, niyok, kalo, ha'u'oi, and the Ko'olau mountains almost every day. She is also lucky during this lockdown to sometimes get to visit Okinawa, Guāhan, and other loved ones in her dreams. Aiko writes and shares poetry, admires her friends, and is thankful for song in times of joy and grief. She is the executive director of the Hawai'i Council for the Humanities.