

Home Is What We Make It

Tatiana Kalani‘ōpua Young

It is July 17, 2013, and my fourth visit to the Wai‘anae Boat Harbor encampment. It is arid, hot, humid. Thorny kiawe trees, undergrowth, and tall sea grass made tough by salty air cover a coral landscape. Twenty or so tents dot the horizon. Barefoot children ride by on bikes covered in red dirt. A sun-kissed woman in her 40s with pink rubber slippers and blue Bongo shorts approaches me on a bike as I make my way to the entrance of the tent city.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes,” I reply. “I am looking for Aunty Shirley. I am a Native Hawaiian anthropologist working on my PhD from Washington State working on issues of homelessness . . .”

Before I could explain any further, the woman interrupts me.

“Sistah, we not homeless. The State is homeless. Wai‘anae is our home and this place is our birthright.”

Then she asks, “How you going help us?”

Before I could respond, she hands me a rake and tells me to help clear the area. Aunty Shirley would return shortly, she says. Then she jets off into the sunset on her bike, just as Aunty Shirley appears from beyond the horizon.

She helped me to understand aloha as a connection between the self and the ‘ohana through action—the sharing of responsibility and reciprocity between human and more-than-human relations, between biological and chosen relatives—and that home is what we make it. Reflecting on my fieldwork at Pu‘uhonua O Wai‘anae, I am struck by the profound lessons of aloha, and how essential they are for building ‘ohana and affirming hope for the future, especially in the face of precarity and uncertainty.

In July of 2020, the Wai‘anae Boat Harbor encampment now known as Pu‘uhonua O Wai‘anae (POW) has come a long way since my first visit in 2013. As part of its vision for the future, POW is clearing a 20-acre land parcel in Wai‘anae Valley that it purchased earlier this year. Its mission to provide inclusion and safety for underserved Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and multiethnic individuals, as well as displaced māhū (intersex/queer/transfolks), wāhine (women), and kāne (men) is now being realized. Known as a refuge for homeless, houseless, and home-free individuals and families struggling with addiction, poverty, and ostracism, POW prioritizes ‘ohana as the means to mend and heal relationships.

Organized resilience operates in the shadows of market economies that promise a good life but fail to deliver. During my time at POW, it was not unusual to hear people complaining about the State's mismanagement of public resources, about greedy corporations and the destructive militaries in charge that keep Hawaiians from our own *ea* (breath, life, sovereignty). To realize its vision of a *kauhale* system, an inclusive Hawaiian home care system that more adequately addresses issues of cultural trauma, land displacement, and poverty, POW functions as a space of solidarity for different community partners, including the precariously housed, corporate, military, and police stakeholders. Sometimes a space must be created for queer relations of harmony and peace to flourish.

Working across the community spectrum has allowed the village to uphold tenets of political interdependence as an *'ohana*. I've seen military officials donate food, labor, and equipment; private companies donate monies and supplies; and masculine police officers sit for hours and hours to talk story about daily life in the village with Twinkle, a queer *wahine* elder and village leader. Though seemingly insignificant, these informal interactions have helped the village to flourish, even as militarization and police violence have destroyed other informal village encampments resembling it.

When I asked Twinkle in 2015 about militarization and the growing presence of a police state in our community, she replied—

“Tati, there is evil in this world and my job is to protect the kids and people of this place. If one guy comes in here and harms or threatens my people with violence, then I will call da police.”

As we talked at her campsite in the dimly lit tent, disheveled cats and dogs huddled on the plywood floor beneath our chairs. Some had mange, but received no less attention and care from Twinkle as the healthier ones.

“No matter what, at the end of the day, whether you work for the military, the police, the State, or even if you no mo one job, we are all people and the only way to get people to change for the better is through *aloha*.”

For Twinkle, the police are a force of good and evil. She knows this well, having interacted with corrupt police officials, convicts, and violent offenders her whole life. Nonetheless, she believes that building relationships is a form of resistance, and a way of overturning the systems that oppress us. Twinkle once said that just as the State might see the village as both a public nuisance (illegal camping), and a productive site for failing state institutions (free labor), village leaders see the State as both a nuisance (surveillance), and useful (social welfare). In acknowledging the village's *ea*, she highlights the importance of seeing home within ourselves, and not something predetermined by institutions. By centering the village's agency, she recognizes the possibility of returning lands, goods, and services to those who need them.

This exchange between informal economics and village agency, I argue, is based on the *'ohana* principle, which allows various stakeholders to build trust by cooperating on solutions to community problems rather than simply feeding bad

faith as well as divisive and dysfunctional politics. Whether it's an elder from the local community providing saimin on Saturdays, or business leaders donating construction materials on weekdays, POW is remarkable precisely because it invites the best of humanity to coexist and flourish. Frontline activists like Twinkle bring Hawaiian activists, outreach service providers, the military, and the police together to build lasting, meaningful change.

Hā'awe i ke kua; hi'i i ke alo.

A burden on the back; a babe in the arms.

Said of a hard-working woman who carries a load on her back and a baby in her arms. (Pukui 50, no. 401)

The daily work of carrying the burden of failed “cistems” situates the above ‘ōlelo no‘eau at Pu‘uhonua O Wai‘anae. By working with and outside of the State, the village carries its heavy burden of weaving ea beyond the settler State, dismantling and transforming the embedded politics of disappearing Indigenous and queer people. Such work requires (k)new ways of seeing and being in the world. It requires prioritizing aloha for one’s self and one’s community, an openness and willingness to heal, and a commitment to affirming life. From this aloha comes the cultivation of healing and loving relationships that mend rather than break our hearts.

While critiques of neoliberalization offer a broader lens of possibility for abolition (a politics seeking to dismantle and transform oppressive systems of carcerality and punishment), the people of Pu‘uhonua O Wai‘anae embody a politics of connection and reconnection. Here, decolonization and demilitarization emerge by activating empathy and intimacy. It is in the alo a he alo (face-to-face) interactions, the “I-got-you-boo” conversations, and the “come-over-my-house-for-dinner” exchanges that create opportunities for something (k)new to emerge. At POW, I’ve seen military personnel offer humanitarian services to displaced Hawaiians with tremendous attention and care. I’ve seen police officers stand hand in hand with us to ward off an eviction. I’ve seen people begin to heal themselves because they have structures of accountability and aloha firmly implanted as having a purpose in life. While I am in no way valorizing the military or the police and the institutions they purport to represent, having witnessed healthy relationships between them and the people for whom “cistems” have failed gives me hope for a more peaceful and prosperous future. The power of aloha is found in the connections between the land and the people.

For many of the villagers that I got to know on a deeper level, “home” was defined as “places where you feel like returning to” and “places of safety.” One of the most profound lessons is how people created community not by conspiring against what they disliked, but by giving others space to define and redefine life for themselves, by facing precarity as an ‘ohana, and by confidently sharing aloha even as we faced threats to erase us. Given the new challenges of the current global pandemic

and its adverse impacts on displaced individuals, how will we show up for aloha, for our community, for ourselves? How will we continue to affirm the ea of Black, immigrant, and Indigenous people of color, our accomplices and allies in the fall of Empire? How will we become the home and future we've been waiting for, and what specific steps are we willing to take to ensure that home, this sense of love and safety, this indelible mark of humanity, belongs equally to us all?

Work Cited

Pukui, Mary Kawena. *‘Ōlelo No‘eau: Hawaiian Proverbs & Poetical Sayings*. Bishop Museum Press, 1983.

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