

Interview Lehuauakea

‘O Moku O Keawe ku‘u mokupuni.

‘O Hilo ku‘u moku.

‘O Pāpa‘ikou ku‘u ahupua‘a.

‘O Mauna a Wākea ku‘u mauna/kuahiwi/pu‘u.

‘O Pu‘uokalepa ku‘u kahawai. ‘O Waiolena ku‘u kai.

‘O Harriet Ku‘uleialoha Kalā Kawai Palea ku‘u kupuna wahine, my ancestor, who I want to bring into this space.

‘O wau ‘o Lehuauakea

Summary

Lehuauakea shares how kapa making has given them the modality to express themselves as both wahine and kane. They feel that their kuleana as an artist is to empower fluid kanaka, particularly within the Pacific Northwest Native Hawaiian diaspora. They say, “That’s where I feel like my responsibility is, not only representing our people, but also our people in diaspora, and our people who live on a spectrum of different identities. I think that’s important”.

Lehuauakea reflects on the complex identities they embody, and feels that it’s within the various and unexpected intersections that they discover who they are. They find belonging in the intersections, and in the liberty of sharing stories, and have found that the more people share their stories, the more we find relationality.

Duration of audio: 18:09

Outline

- Reflects on their sense of kuleana (responsibility) in their community, particularly within the Pacific Northwest Native Hawaiian diaspora.
- Shares their first experience on discovering their calling to kuleana as an artist with a queer Pacific Islander youth in diaspora, who felt validate after seeing their kapa in the Portland Museum of Art
- Lehuauakea reflects on the journey of self-discovery and identity through kapa making. They embrace both spirits and prioritizes intentionality and self-expression.
- Introduces themselves with their genealogy of mixed ethnicities, and growing up on Hawaii's Big Island and Oahu.
- Lehuauakea reflects on the complex identity as a person of mixed ethnicity, who is both queer and māhū. Expresses that they feel their belonging in the middle of different intersections of their identity.
- Shares the importance of finding belonging in relation by sharing our stories, and recognizing that we are all made up of life experiences with intersections and diversity.

Interview

Kanani: Do you have any memories of having kuleana as a child?

Lehuauakea: So growing up, I'm the oldest of three kids. And, you know, I think being the eldest child, there was a lot of responsibility placed on me to be the stereotypical role model, you know, do well in school, like, take care of your sisters, like, be a good kid. When I was a younger kid I didn't think there was any other option. As I got older, it felt harder and harder to fit that.

There was a lot of expectation placed on me and so with that came responsibilities placed on me. But, you know, in a more cultural sense, like, thinking about the deeper meanings of kuleana, being the only kid [of the siblings] who went to Kamehameha School, I think there was also a lot of kuleana placed on me by my dad, who is also a KS grad to kind of uphold that for our family.

Beyond that, though, I felt very proud as a kid to be Kanaka, I felt very connected to who I was as a native Hawaiian kid. Even though I didn't grow up with family who danced hula or spoke Hawaiian at home, or, you know, made kapa, or did a lot of cultural things, on the weekends and things like that. I still felt like, I knew who I was, going to Kamehameha and learning about our kupuna in school and, you know, singing songs in 'ōlelo, even though a lot of them were Christian, which, you know, is a complicated thing, I think, for me and a lot of other people.

But in terms of kuleana, and responsibility, you know, I did feel maybe a clearer sense of that when I was younger kid and it got a little blurry when I was a teenager. Now I'm almost 30, I've figured out more of where my kuleana lies,

not just in what is expected of me, or responsibilities expected of me, but also what I have to offer other people.

Kanani: What do you feel your kuleana and kuleana is now?

Lehuauakea: For me now, what stands out as my bigger overarching responsibilities goes beyond my family and more so with the community that I've built, and the community that has found me in the last few years. Much of that is rooted in the Pacific Northwest native Hawaiian diaspora. And that's also where my kapa making, in a roundabout way, got started when I was going to school in Oregon. And shortly after beginning my kapa journey, I started dancing Hula again, for a hālau outside of Portland, Oregon. A lot of those people in our hālau family are Kanaka in diaspora.

So, doing what I can with the platform that I have as an artist and a young kapa maker, using the skills and the voice that I have as a visual artist to empower our diaspora community, especially kids who maybe have never gone home to Hawai'i. That's been super powerful.

It's little things that are really the big things. You know, a couple years ago, I had an exhibition at the Portland Art Museum. Which is really cool, because, you know, that was the first art museum I had ever been to, and I didn't go until I was like, 17 years old. We went on a class field trip and I remember thinking, as a teenager, that it'd be so cool to get my work in a place like this. I had a very limited view of what being an artist was. Then not even like 10 years later, my art is up in this beautiful gallery space. I had this offshoot room of my own work. I could have never imagined that, but one of the pieces that was in the show was a piece called Mana Māhū. That was the first piece that I ever did with earth pigments and plant dyes that I gathered and made all myself and I made the kapa for it as well, with some of the first wauke that I harvested with my Kumu Wesley Sen. It was dedicated to my journey, following not only kapa, but also my journey in self discovery and self identity as a fluid or Māhū individual.

I think that piece to me represents how those things go hand in hand. And, you know, the museum is open to a lot of school groups, a lot of public schools, and educators bring their kids in, for art tours and things like that. I got an email a few months after the exhibition had been opened, from a teacher who spoke about how one of their kids who was a queer identifying Pacific Islander middle schooler who saw that work and couldn't stop glowing because they felt so seen and so validated in a way that, you know, Monet paintings, and Van Gogh just can't really touch on.

So for my work, to have ripples like that, where, you know, even years after making that piece, it's hung in a museum and some kids come by and out of a group of 20 classmates, one of them resonates with that work in a way that is similar to the experience I have as the person who made it. That's where I feel like my kuleana is. That's where I feel like my responsibility is, not only representing our people, but also our people in diaspora, and our people who live on a spectrum of different identities. I think that's important.

Kanani: What was that process like, when you were making that piece and collecting all of those pigments and working with the kapa?

Lehuauakea: It was one of the earlier pieces that I'd ever made on my kapa journey. So I'd really only been doing kapa for maybe a year or two at that point. I was learning so much at the time about how to process the material, how it grows, how to harvest it, how to gather my own pigments, to make paints, how different soils work together, how they don't maybe, different plant dyes and how I might be able to mix them together, or maybe not. And so I was learning so much about the material. And it really forced me to slow down and kind of change how I approach making work as an artist.

Because, you know, it's one thing to go to the store and buy your brushes and your paints and your canvas. That's a very immediate way of working. Then there's also the way of working with kapa, which demands its own slowness. And I hadn't really worked in that kind of way before, but I was so excited, so, you know, the patience, I guess, came with it. In part of that process, you know,

I started learning more about the traditional gender, quote unquote, gender roles that applied to kapa making through the kapu system. And while there is some fluidity, like there always is between the roles for kane and the roles for wahine, generally speaking, the men made a lot of the tools, the carving and whatnot, and the women were the ones who beat the material. There were specified areas that were just for certain activities. So just for wahine, just for kane, and there was not really too much overlap. However, there were some cases where some individuals could move in between these two areas and, or, some techniques that kane were allowed to do, like Kane were allowed to make certain kinds of kapa, that wahine were forbidden to make. And so I think, learning more about this process, and the fluidity of it at times, really resonated with me.

I think the other thing important to note, too, is out of necessity, today, a lot of kapa makers, who don't identify as māhū, make their tools and they beat the kapa. So they do both, they do everything. Because we're in a period of revitalization, and reclamation, so learning as much as you can about all the different processes and doing them yourself has its advantages. But for me, I feel like I started doing that less out of necessity. It became more so about how I feel able to embody both spectrums, or both ends of that spectrum of kuleana. Where it's not just my role as wahine to beat kapa or my role as kane to carve the tools. I think it's a more intentional way of doing both. No shame to people who do both out of necessity because I think we need that as well. Because we are revitalizing this practice. But just speaking from my experience, I think I approach it with a different mindset.

Kanani: Could you share a little about your family, and what lands you're connected to?

Lehuauakea: I was born in Portland, Oregon, which is not too far from where my parents met in college. My mom is Shawn Suzanne Mitchell. She was born in Oregon, and she was adopted in a small town called Roseburg, and my dad is Garth Keola Fujio Fernandez, he was born and raised in Honolulu, and went

to college in Eugene, Oregon, at the University of Oregon, which is where my parents both met. And they got engaged after two weeks, and I came along a few years later. My family on my mom's side we don't know too much about and I've never met my maternal grandfather. Or anyone on her side, except for my maternal grandmother, her biological mom. And on my dad's side, we are mainly Japanese and Hawaiian, with a little bit of Chinese and theoretically, Portuguese.

My dad grew up in Salt Lake and we also have connections in Kalihi area as well. His parents, my grandparents live on the Hāmākua coast on the Hilo side, in a small town called Pāpa'ikou. So that's where I was raised. Shortly after I was born. My parents thought it was important for me to be raised with my grandparents and back home in Hawaii. So we moved back. And I lived there on the Big Island for several years up until I was starting fourth grade. So around, I want to say 10 years old. And then my family moved to Oahu, where I stayed until about eighth, or just about to start ninth grade. And then we moved back to Beaverton, Oregon, where I finished up high school and stayed for college and all of that.

So, lots of moving around. My family on my dad's side has been connected to the Big Island for several decades. We lived along the Hamakua coast, and Pā'auhau uka. And on that side of my family we are Kalās', Kalawai'as', Paleas', and Kawai's'. And on the Japanese side, we are Kannos' and Hebarus' and Nomis', So lots of plantation history that we kind of all converged with on my dad's side. And a lot of that is mainly centered on Big Island and O'ahu, and that I feel most connected to; but there's also some family lineage, that's a little bit more extended, connected to Kauai and Maui.

Kanani: Do you differentiate being a Kanaka Māhū and LGBTQIA2+?

Lehuauakea: Being Kanaka, who also identifies as Māhū, and feels comfortable with the term queer, or gender fluid, I think it, it makes it easier to wrap my mind around my own identity and feel more comfortable in articulating it because of how much fluidity beyond gender and sexuality lives within the worldview that

we have as Kanaka. So there's so many blurred lines that are intentionally blurred that live within our mo'olelo, that lives within our kupua and akua and the kinolau that they take the forms of. Sometimes, multiple different deities can take the same kinds of forms, but maybe in different contexts or places. Even when we talk about the [‘ōlelo] words that we have, the poetic quality, the kaona of our words, and the idea of makawalu, there being at least eight different ways of seeing the same thing. I think, at least for me, it feels easier for me to be comfortable in my own sense of fluidity because that's how I was culturally raised, maybe not religiously raised, but culturally, with a Hawaiian kind of worldview. And so, on that note, you know, I feel that I identify comfortably as Māhū or Māhūwahine, but also gender fluid, or the larger like kind of umbrella term of queer. I do think there is distinction between the English terms of LGBTQ and Māhū, I think with there is a lot of overlap, I think with Māhū it feels to me like there's more of a spiritual kuleana foundation. With LGBTQ+ I don't feel the same spiritual ties with those terms. And maybe that's because those terms to me don't come with the same Hawaiian cultural beliefs and terminology that Māhū comes with. So, while I do often see those terms used interchangeably, I don't think that they are full, replaceable translations of one another.

Kanani: Being someone is kanaka and diaspora, and māhū, what does belonging feel like to you?

Lehuakea: I think sometimes it's kind of funny, because my life feels like it's just a combination of so many different intersections, you know, being born on the continent, but raised back home in Hawai'i, and then coming back to the continent and being part of the diaspora again, and then also being Kanaka, but being raised Japanese as well, and being mixed. And then there's also the aspect of the work that I do being a kapa maker, cultural practitioner, but also finding places for my work in a contemporary fine art context, you know, so, an artist practitioner, my Kumu Aunty Dalani says.

Then there's also the fact that I don't feel fully embodied by woman or man, identifiers, you know, [I'm] in the middle. So all these intersections come

together, and that's where I belong. Which feels, sometimes, a little contradictory, because, for so much of my life, I felt like, I'm too much of one thing to be this one thing, but not enough of another thing to be that other thing. So like, I'm kind of just stuck in this middle ground.

But I feel like more and more that we have conversations about things like this and express our experiences and tell our stories, the more I find that people have really similar experiences themselves. And I think it's beautiful to find relation on that level, because things I don't think are ever so cut and dry, so black and white, there's always a gray area where beautiful things can happen, where the nuances of those grays in the middle, make you more unique and make you who you are. I've built a home in the gray. I don't feel like I'm just Hawaiian. I don't feel like I'm just a kapa maker. There's so much more to me and everyone, you know. And belonging to me feels like expressing those stories that make you not so one end of the spectrum, but realizing that we are able to find relation on many different levels, because of all the intersections that we walk and embody.

Kanani: That was beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. Is there anything else that you want to share?

Lehuauakea: I think the only thing that I didn't really touch too much on was I grew up in a very Christian household. And, you know, going to Kamehameha which I think they're Christian, but I think Protestant is the specific brand of Christian. There was a lot of religious strictness around me, when I was growing up, and so there was a lot of stigma as well, that came along with that. A lot of judgment, too.

As we'd see more and more representation of LGBTQ and Māhū individuals in our community, there were more expressions of those stigmas that were verbalized. And so as a kid growing up, I didn't feel safe to always share about how I felt. So I felt like it was easier and safer for me to just kind of blend in and go along with the flow, especially, you know, being the oldest child, I'm supposed to be a role model or something like that.

So I remember one time, I think this was when I was in high school, and I expressed to my mom how I was feeling. As a teenager, you're already going through enough with your identity and your body changing and learning about how you identify, and your sexuality, and all of this stuff, like coming into age. I expressed to her I was feeling and she said, I laugh about it now, but it really sucked going through at the time, she said, *“Are you sure? Like, I don't think that you could be into girls. I think it's just because of Lady Gaga, isn't it?”* At that time, Lady Gaga had come out as bi or there were rumors about her being bi or something like that, and I think she just thought that it was my way of being some kind of rebellious teenager. So if that gives you any idea of what it was like, when I tried to open up. That was the one and only time I ever tried to and that was it. So yeah, there was a lot of, you know, stigma and judgment. And so it wasn't really until after I left home and started going to college that I felt more comfortable to explore myself and who I was, and find ways that felt comfortable for me to articulate my identity, and safe too.

Kanani: We are trying to live through the misconceptions of our previous generation. I think I'm going to be really happy when we don't have to have these conversations, if you know what I mean. Though, I think we still have to have this conversation because there's still a lot of misconceptions out there, because of the systems that have been embedded into our worldview, even as indigenous people, and all people in general. There's definitely been movement for change, and I feel we now have some space for being honest with who we are.

Lehuauakea: I would love to get to the point where we don't have to have these conversations. But, we have to have these conversations now, to get to the point where we don't need to anymore.