

Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry
Poem commentary by No'u Revilla, 2020

Speaker: No'u Revilla

Date of recording: July 17, 2020

Location: Pālolo, Honolulu, Hawai'i, poet's home

Length: 13 minutes, 58 seconds

START OF RECORDING

No'u Revilla: 'O Henrietta Lā'ieikawai Kanana ka wahine.

'O Ventura Repolidon Revilla ke kane.

Noho pū lāua a hānau 'ia 'o John Henry Haumea Revilla.

'O John Henry Haumea Revilla ke kane.

'O Deborah Cairme ka wahine.

Noho pū lāua a hānau 'ia 'o No'ukahau'oli Aisha Revilla.

'O No'ukahau'oli Aisha Revilla au.

He hawai'i au.

My name is No'ukahau'oli Revilla; everybody calls me No'u. The title of my poem is "Shapeshifters Banned, Censored, or Otherwise Shit-Listed, aka Chosen Family Poem."

[No'u Revilla Revilla reads "Shapeshifters Banned, Censored, or Otherwise Shit-Listed, aka Chosen Family Poem"]

NR: Hā'ō'ū is where my grandmother lives in Hāna on the east side of Maui. My grandmother's name is Lā'ieikawai, and she is the core of my poems, so many of my poems, the core of the shapeshifting theme that runs through my work. Even her name, written as Laieikawai without diacritical marks on her birth certificate, is debated between her daughters and her granddaughters. In her mouth, in the mouth of people who love her or are compelled to her, my grandmother's name shapeshifts. When she is in Hāna, she is Lā'ieikawai or Auntie Lā'ie. When she lived on Pōhai Street and her sister Puni was still alive, she did not go by Lā'ieikawai at all. As she helped raise me, my grandmother was called Henrietta, the wahine who made shave ice at the Kahului laundromat.

Ho'okahi nō; he lehu ka inoa.

I bring up my grandmother's name because this poem is both a list poem and a name poem. The title "Shapeshifters Banned, Censored, or Otherwise Shit-Listed, aka Chosen Family Poem" set the stakes. I knew I would be writing a list poem that would be part gossip, part mele ma'i, part Indigiqueer feminist love letter, part decolonial worldbuilding, and most importantly, part mo'okū'auhau.

Mo'okū'auhau is the Hawaiian concept of genealogy, and as an oral, literary, and rhetorical device, mo'okū'auhau encompasses the composition and recitation of genealogy. More than a list of names, mo'okū'auhau reveal important details of one's relationship to people, places, and responsibilities. Noenoe Silva, an Ōiwi historian and language expert, talks about "mo'okū'auhau consciousness" as the interlocking kuleana [sphere of privilege and responsibility] to listen, record, and interpret. In Hawaiian culture, the question of who you are cannot be answered meaningfully without knowing where and who you come from.

The "Shapeshifters" poem reaches for the understood-but-never-spoken mo'okū'auhau, the lines of relation that are hidden in dark, damp places. I found myself gravitating, unsurprisingly as a queer Hawaiian woman, to the image of ma'i. In 'ōlelo Hawai'i, ma'i denotes genitals and biological genealogies. So in one strand, the poem "Shapeshifters" pursues the question of who stole the ma'i, which can invoke any number of smaller pursuits depending on who the reader is. "Who stole the ma'i" can mean who stole desire, who stole consent, who stole purity, who stole my origin story? The repetition of ma'i plays off the third line: "The one named Mai, Mai, E 'Ai." In Hawai'i, mai is a directional that signals movement towards the speaker. "Mai, mai, e 'ai" is a common expression that invites people to come and eat. So for people who do not speak Hawaiian, playing with mai and ma'i so early on in the poem attempts to unify those lines at least sonically and encourages them to widen their attention to what else may share a link to the word ma'i. For readers who do speak Hawaiian, the mai-ma'i dynamic is playful; it acknowledges a deeper intimacy and invites them to think about connections between sexuality, kinship, and sovereignty in Hawai'i.

In this way, call-and-response became the governing logic of the first several drafts. I let myself be led by the anaphora "the one." During the drafting stage, I would ask myself, which relations would stand together at a party or a funeral and trade gossip? Which relations must be separated or all hell breaks loose? Which relations are loud, hungry, haunted? Which relations need the space of a longer line to tell you their names properly? In some way, I'm always seeking to understand and practice Audre Lorde's work of biomythography. You know, fingering that line between myth, history, and memoir; between individual memory and collective memory. And, for me, anaphora can activate that in-between-ness.

I think about my time in graduate school. Craig Santos Perez asked me some of the most generative questions during my dissertation, including the very simple question: “What is a line?” Technically, I understood the line to be a basic tool of expression, organization, and rhythm in a poem. Yet none of what I told him that day satisfied me, and that dissatisfaction spurred a new level of rigor and honesty. I needed to bring my ancestors to that question. I needed to bring my lands and my language, my ‘ōlelo makuahine, to that question. Because in ‘Ōiwi poetry, relationships exceed kanaka-to-kanaka [human-to-human] bonds. They include intimacies between akua [deities], ‘āina [land], and kanaka[people]. I think about the phenomenal Haunani-Kay Trask and her poem “To Write By Moonlight,” where she deploys ‘āina-based images of mahina [moon], mai‘a [banana], and niu [coconut] to empower ‘Ōiwi metaphors and assert the genealogical relationship between ‘Ōiwi and our land. In Haunani’s poetry, in all of our ‘Ōiwi mo‘olelo, ‘āina is not passive. ‘Āina is an active and exemplary storyteller, and as ‘Ōiwi are descendants of ‘āina, Haunani’s poem was one of the first to imply, for me, that ‘Ōiwi literary production is not only a creative act but also a genealogical inheritance.

And here we come back to the role of mo‘okū‘auhau, so that persistent question of “what is a line?” What is a line of poetry? What is a bloodline? What is a line?

And one of the most rewarding experiences of “Shapeshifters” was being able to perform the poem for Leanne Simpson. I had the honor of opening her reading event in Honolulu in February 2019, and I performed the piece in a set of poems that I framed as a way of introducing Leanne to my family. Leanne’s work is so vital. My body exploded when I read *Islands of Decolonial Love*, and I had just finished reading *As We Have Always Done*, which inspired another poem I wrote called “so sacred, so queer.” And I find that gratitude inspires reciprocity, and I am so grateful for Leanne Simpson. Performing the poem for her that night felt like an ancestral moment.

And so with “Shapeshifters,” I wanted to establish shapeshifting in the context of Native Hawaiian wahine, intergenerational stories, queer desire, and consent. How can a list of individuals grow into a “we”? Because chosen family is about cultivating shared ground beyond bloodlines but also beyond trauma. When I say my ea is bound to your ea, I want to work for our shared ground to mean more than shared histories of violence or kill-ability or the struggle to survive. There are so many queer Indigenous women writing poetry in Oceania right now, and we deserve more than a lifetime in metaphor. I write poetry to root me to my mo‘okū‘auhau and to re-route worlds of pain toward strength and strategy. “Shapeshifters

Banned, Censored, or Otherwise Shit-Listed, aka Chosen Family Poem” is an ancestor-affirming, sex-positive, queer-loving, and queer-living work.

E ka po’e mo’o, in whatever skin you have chosen today, I see you. I believe you. A hiki i ke aloha ‘āina hope loa.

END OF RECORDING