Kinana Hale: An Investigation of the Tropical and the Desert and How They Shape Our Notion of Identity and Self

Connie Pan

Grand Valley State University, panc@student.gvsu.edu

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My project is a series of creative non fiction writing which ranges from small bodies of writing that explore a simple idea or a simple moment to larger essays that contemplate more complicated ideas. The writing attempts to expand on the definition of the personal narrative within the genre of creative non-fiction by juxtaposing personal experience and research to demonstrate what Sandell Morse insists is desired: “Creative non-fiction seems to be filling a universal craving for what is theoretically true… Yet, something inside us craves a reality closer to home.”

I combined my personal experiences of growing up on Maui, being removed from Maui and my numerous visits to the island combined with knowledge acquired through extensive research including but not limited to the Hawaiian language, Hawaiian history, monarchy, flora and fauna, geography, lifestyles and values of Maui and the social issues facing a multicultural community of such rich diversity.

I explore the idea of home using my unique perspective of the non-definitive and ever changing term, home. I try to express the value of home, the value of land and the value of tradition by exploring the moments in which I have felt at home in a geographical place, in a dwelling place, in a moment shared with another person, in a family recipe and how these experiences I try to capture in writing shape my notion of identity and self.
There is a breaking point. One can be pushed and pushed until they are forced to react. In consideration of the politics of Lipoa Point and Honolua Bay, there are two sides. The Save Honolua Coalition desires to preserve the land for its archaeological, cultural, environmental and recreational value, and Maui Pineapple and Company sees this land as a commodity. Their conceptual plans include a golf course, which would be Maui's eighteenth golf course, and forty luxury homes, which would be purchased—more than likely—by people who don't live on Maui, a vacation home, which means that property taxes would go up for those who call Maui home, making it virtually impossible for them to buy or keep a home.

Locals insist we have lost too much open space. A lot of arguments—especially arguments in which silence has been a role—begin with enough is enough. Establishing a position is like releasing a wave. I don’t have control. I want to see how it breaks. Where it breaks. If it comes back. If it strikes hard enough to cause a ripple. If it strikes hard enough to make a change.

In Hawaii, developers often focus on properties around five star hotels and golf courses and feature a choice of residential options including condominiums, townhouses, or secluded luxury homes. High end real estate agents then recruit A-list celebrities to purchase these properties to enhance demand and image.

Locals have been pushed into certain places—over an invisible border—away from these palaces. The neighborhoods are not far from ghettos. They are people who work well past retirement. At least two jobs. Living with immediate family and extended family. For example, I live in a yellow, one story house with two bedrooms and one bathroom with my grandma, my grandpa, my father and my brother. My grandma and grandpa worked full-time, two jobs, until they were 74 years old.

The cheapest home for sale, online, is $425,000. It’s located in Lahaina, has three bedrooms and two bathrooms. With no down payment and a thirty year mortgage, this house would cost $1,180.56 a month, to purchase. Minimum wage in Hawaii is $7.25 an hour. Working forty hours a week, a monthly paycheck, before taxes, would be $1,160.

What we are trying to defend: The people who live here have a saying, “Maui no ka oi.” Meaning: Maui is the best. Number one. Every one has a different experience of home, their
personal narrative.

The first things that come to mind when I think of home is the smell, a mixture of tropical flowers, ripe fruit and salt water. In my grandparents’ yard, we have Night-Blooming Jasmine, Ginger, Plumeria and Pikake.

When I come home to visit, I’m greeted with a lei made from these flowers. While I stay, my dad picks me fresh flowers from our garden. I put the flower behind my ear. Behind the right ear is a sign that you are single. Behind the left ear is a sign that you are taken. He sticks a flower in my pillowcase every night before I go to sleep, so I have sweet dreams.

Lipoa Point is where my father took my brother, Matt and I on the first Thanksgiving following our parents’ separation, leading to their divorce and our move to Grand Rapids with my mother. We watched two surfers on twenty foot faces. Cutting the cerulean blue, it curling and exploding white foam.

The adrenaline of just them and that wave. How intimate. The thrill. The new perspective. You can’t see the island the way they do, when you’re standing on it. Sitting on a surfboard in between sets. The clarity of the water, like glass. A world opened up for you, the vibrant reef and the tropical fish. The cool water up to your knees. The sun blazing on your back. The salt on your skin, tightening. Drying, leaving a white residue I always feel compelled to lick.

The bay only breaks a couple of times in the winter, but has an extremely long barreling right hand wave. My dad tells us a story about the time he was riding waves much like the ones we were watching. He tells us about what happens if the wave decides it will have its way with you.

He rode them in and paddled back out. Only to catch the one that would take him under. He caught it a little too late, got caught in the cave—a section of the wave—notorious for pulling surfers under and keeping them there. He hit his head on the reef and swam in with his broken board. I imagine those minutes spent underwater and swimming to shore. How they didn’t move like time. A different metronome, clicking between, am I going to live, or am I going to die?

I’ve had that moment with the ocean. When it reaches out to remind you you’re human. Simply mortal. It overpowers you, boasting its existence beyond the horizon. That it can conjure more power with the moon, with the reef, with the wind. It throws you around underneath, or puts you back, farther away from shore. And once you finally get there, nothing feels more like home. You lay down, comforted by solidity. Until your heartbeat slows, until you get your breath
back. Coughing up salt water, you leave, your back to the ocean, walking away from a fight you
lost. Bloody and woozy, taking its sand in your hair.

My grandma took my dad to the hospital. Twenty three stitches later, she brought him
home. Grandpa was in the front yard. Standing over debris, what were once his four surfboards.
Grandpa stood, his head bent, the machete hanging at his side and told my dad, “I warned you.”

The machete still hangs on the wall in the garage, among an array of family photos,
posing a threat. Sometimes, I stare at it and watch its meaning change: this machete is used by
this family, this machete protects this family, this machete raised this family.

The waves shook Lipoa Point, making the leather seat cushions, covered with beach
towels, vibrate. Our Thanksgiving Day, listening to our father fill up the silence. Sometimes just
silence. Enveloping us, while my dad hoped he and my mother would come to some sort of
agreement, negotiate.

Every time I return to Maui, my dad drives me around the island to show me how it has
changed since I left. Lipoa Point and Honolua Bay is one of the first places he takes me. We
walk to the edge and watch different surfers on different waves down at the bay. Where my dad
split his head open, his hard head cracked open like a coconut, a lychee. Something unwilling to
give in, that requires technique and special tools. On the left, cranes are lifting slabs.

I point in the direction, “That looks so ugly. What is it?”

“More hotels. Over there…” I look to the right, “is where the developers want to build a
new golf course and forty luxury homes and there…” I look down at my feet, “where you’re
standing is where the changes have become too much.”

I start crying because my home isn’t how I remember it. Isn’t how I left it. I know change
is inevitable but I yearn for the island’s wilderness. Honolua Bay is the beginning of open space
in West Maui, even though West Maui begins way to the left. The open space of this bay feels
like an embrace. It a place locals drive to on their day off. It’s a place I crave, four thousand
miles away. I think of the locals and how they are fighting to protect it and want to restore it and
desire to perpetuate it for their children and their children and their children. I think of all the
things people keep at bay. What’s hiding within us, churning, waiting to unfurl.

I cry for the lack of resolution. The plans lay dormant—Maui Pineapple and Company
are currently working on a re-proposal—Save Honoula Coalition’s bill remains Resolution
Number Blank.
Someone, something—somewhere—is always under a ledge. We cannot see it or them coming up behind us, right in front of us, right in our home. Drawing up plans and drawing up papers, while we're looking the other way. We don't know the effect it has on us. How it grips us—these things we keep at bay—until we're talking. Defending. Fighting for. Pleading. Begging for at least a negotiation. Let’s stand firm, stand strong, with enough is enough, try to end the argument with that. Just stop. Stop right there.
You’re probably wondering what spam musubi is… It’s one of those confused meats. Like a hotdog. Like Vienna sausage. That same pink color with a different name and a different shape and different packaging. SPAM comes in a block form in an aluminum can with a peel back top. The end product, spam musubi (pronounced moo-soo-bee), is a local favorite and can be found in grocery stores, convenience stores, school cafeterias, food stands, almost everywhere. It kind of looks like sushi but you eat it like a sandwich. This local delicacy is so popular someone invented the Spam Musubi Maker. It’s a Plexiglas block mold, about the width and height of a block of SPAM, with a Plexiglas press. What you need is 3 cups of short or medium grain rice, 4 cups of water, 5 sheets of sushi nori, 1 12 ounce can of SPAM luncheon meat, ¼ cup of soy sauce, ¼ cup of sugar, ¼ cup of mirin (rice wine), and more water.

First, you need to make rice. I’m a pro at this. It was one of my chores. I got paid an allowance for this. Make rice for every meal. Wash the rice, stirring the water and grains with your hands, until the water runs clear. Stir, drain, add water, stir, drain, add water, repeat until water is clear. If the water is not clear, it will be starchy, and no one will like the rice therefore no one will enjoy the meal so make sure the water is clear. The recipe I found online says four cups of water but I just measure it to the first line on my middle finger while the tip of my finger lied on the even level of the rice. Now that I am twenty four the water level has gotten a little below the first line of my middle finger, or above, depending on which way you look at my finger. Place pot inside rice cooker and turn on.

Second, cut the nori in half widthwise and place in a Ziploc bag. If the nori is left sitting out, it will become stale, tough and no one will like their spam musubi.

Third, cut the SPAM into eight rectangular slices. These slices should be about ¼ of an inch thick. Place slices in a frying pan. You won’t need any kind of butter, oil or PAM spray because SPAM can be fried in its own juices without sticking, that is one of the miracles of SPAM. Fry the slices until they are brown and a little crispy. Remove from heat and place on paper towels to soak up all that excess grease.

Fourth, in a saucepan over high heat, mix the soy sauce, sugar and miri; bring to a boil and remove the pan from the heat. Set the fried SPAM in the mixture and let it marinate.
Fifth, place a piece of nori on a plate and position the Spam Musubi maker over the nori “so the length of the press is in the middle of the nori (widthwise). The press and the width of the nori should fit exactly the length of a slice of SPAM.” If it does not you aren’t following the directions right and you are doing it wrong. Also, if you don’t have a Spam musubi maker you can use an empty and preferable washed (all those juices) can of SPAM. A Spam Musubi maker is essentially a Spam can without a top or a bottom. Be careful removing the bottom of the can. Don’t cut your fingers. It does not conveniently have a peel back bottom.

Sixth, spread about ¼ cup of the cooked rice across the bottom of the musubi maker (on top of the nori); press the rice down with the flat part of the press (the second piece of the Spam musubi maker. Note: If you are using a Spam can to make your musubi, your fingers work just fine as a press. Just press down. Make it compact.) Place a slice of SPAM on top of the rice and cover the SPAM with an additional ¼ cup of cooked rice and press down. Remember we eat musubi like a sandwich, it must fit in our mouths (which are big). Remove the musubi from the press by moving the whole stack down (with the other part of the press) while lifting off of the press. Then fold one end of nori over the musubi and wet the other side of the nori with a little bit of water. Fold that end of nori over onto the other piece of nori that is sticking to the rice. You can cut this finished musubi into four pieces, three pieces, in half or you can eat it whole. Repeat directions with the other seven pieces of SPAM and the remaining ingredients. Rinse and dry the musubi maker between each use to prevent stickiness or too much wetness.

Seventh, do not refrigerate. Leave it on the counter at room temperature. Or keep it warm. It you refrigerate it, it will get dry, stale, flaky, and rubbery and no one will like it.

Eighth (a family secret), we add furikake. It is delicious. Or “even more ono.” Which means more than delicious.
My great-grandfather, Ta-Tai was a witchdoctor. He lived to be 101 years old. His diet consisted mainly of saltwater fish. I think his favorite was Papio. He was a fisherman. He liked to fish at night. Barefoot on sea cliffs.

The sea cliffs are ends where the land cracked off, fell and cascaded to the bottom of the sea because of the shake of an earthquake on the line of a fault or erosion induced by waves. Hawaii has the highest sea cliffs: one thousand and ten meters high in Kalaupapa. Lanai’s are impressive. Maui’s are climable and jumpable.

Nights in Maui are midnight blue. The sea cliffs are high black walls that create the image of the end of the world. Like the Earth drops off or simply stops where the white foam of the waves lap against black. The moon in Maui is so bright it casts shadows. The stars are closer too. You never need a flashlight as long as the moon is shining on you.

One night, Ta-Tai felt a bite and began to reel in what seemed to be his biggest fish. He lost the fight, but the hook came back dangling with red hair pulled from the pores of a head. He heard a tail cutting the ocean’s surface and heard his father’s voice, “If you catch a mermaid, you live forever.”

When my grandmother was little, she liked to curse. Every time Ta-Tai caught her, he’d take the goop from their dog’s eye and smear it on her tear ducts. He’d tell her to open her eyes, every time she used that word that’s what got closer to her.

I asked her what she saw. She shook her head, closed her eyes and mumbled, “Soooome scarry… a man on fire, red.” So, she made up her own curse word: Guuudfunnit! And uses it. Always.

My grandmother was in her thirties when she decided she wanted children. She had my aunt, Patricia and tried again and again for three years. She went to Ta-Tai and explained her problem. He took a bowl, crushed some bone, added something, said something, and told her to drink. Nine months later came my father, Michael.

My family has a lot of respect for the dead. We set aside tables for shrines. We feed them when we eat, and we light candles for them. And let them burn through the night.

In return, the dead take care of us. Ta-Tai assigned a man to look after our family. He’s black, has gold teeth, a bald head and stands about seven feet tall. When he visits, he leans on our yellow, one story house. He’s so big that our house creaks and shifts. My uncle made him his own chair, an Adirondack, out of wood. We keep it in the front yard facing the Plumeria tree, so he knows he’s always welcome there.

I’ve never seen him, but I’ve seen my grandmother see him. I had a feeling if I looked, I would have seen him too. I just watched my grandma. We were sitting at the dining room table which faces a window that faces the front yard and stretches from floor to ceiling. It was 4 a.m., and we were smoking cigarettes. She was telling me stories much like this.

My grandmother stopped talking, mid-sentence. She rose her eyes and with her eyes, her
nose and chin. Her cigarette hung from her bottom lip. She looked like she was praying, but I knew she was looking at him. He is tall. She looked like she was staring at the stars. We all know when he’s visiting, because they leave a can of Coors Light on the arm of his wood chair. I don’t have to shake the can anymore. It’s always half gone.

My mom has dark green eyes the color of emerald pools. Her pupils are rimmed with daffodil yellow. She has the third eye too. She told me, once, when I was old enough; she always knew I was magic. The day I was born I turned her green eyes blue.

We moved to Germany shortly after I was born. One night, my mom woke up at midnight. Popo, my great-grandpa, my grandpa’s dad was standing in the doorway in his token blue hoodie, smoking his pipe. My mom asked him how he was doing without moving her mouth. He smiled. She asked him if he wanted to see me. He nodded. She pointed to the next room and told him I was in my crib.

I started screaming. A second later, he reappeared sulking at the ground. She’s just a baby; she doesn’t know. He looked up at her, comforted. She told him he could stay as long as he liked, our home is his home. He smiled. Would you like me to wake up Michael? He shook his head no, waved and disappeared. My father woke up seconds later, “I smell Popo’s pipe!”

They got the call the next morning. My mom and dad didn’t have to fish for it and they didn’t have to offer the consolation, “Nobody lives forever.” It was simply, “Popo passed away last night…”