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## From a Native Daughter: Seeking Home and Ancestral Lines through a Dashboard Hula Girl

A. Mārata Ketekiri Tamaira

Nānā i ke kumu. *Look to the source.*

— Hawaiian ‘ōlelo no‘eau (proverb)

In the Hawaiian language the term *‘ae kai* refers to the place where land and sea meet, the water’s edge or shoreline, the beach. It is, as Pacific historian Greg Dening has written, an “in-between space...an unresolved space where things can happen, where things can be made to happen. It is a space of transformation. It is a space of crossings.”<sup>1</sup> This expanded definition of *‘ae kai* serves as a cogent touchstone for examining Adrienne Keahi Pao’s and Robin Lasser’s most recent installation work *Dashboard Hula Girl: In Search of Aunty Keahi*, which featured in the Smithsonian’s Culture Lab exhibition *‘Ae Kai: A Culture Lab on Convergence* in Honolulu, July 7–9, 2017. In the following writing, I invoke a sort of *‘ae kai* of my own in which I merge scholarly analysis with visceral first-hand experience of *Dashboard Hula Girl*. The result, I hope, is a richly textured exposé that simulates in written form the enigmatic domain that comprises the convergence zone—that is, the *‘ae kai*—of intellectual understanding and felt encounter.

San Francisco-based artists Pao and Lasser have been combining their creative energies for well over a decade to produce their enigmatic “Dress Tent” installation and photographic series.<sup>2</sup> The dress tents, which manifest as large-scale interactive “garments” that are erected on site-specific landscapes and worn by female subjects, are in equal measure whimsically playful and incisively political. In what amounts to a fusion of architecture, sculpture, fashion, the body, and the land, the tents function as discrete spaces for addressing a wide range of contemporary issues, including identity, gender

(*Picnic Dress Tent* [2005]), U.S. immigration policy (*Ms. Homeland Security: Illegal Entry Dress Tent* [2005]), and the most pressing environmental crisis of our time, global warming (*Ice Queen: Glacial Retreat Dress Tent* [2008]). In terms of identifying the broader rationale of their work, Lasser states that the goal is to inspire people to think reflexively about “their own bodies in relation to place, and their own sense of identity and social justice.”<sup>3</sup> In this way the dress tents constitute potent activation sites that provoke critical engagement and self-reflection.

As the most recent iteration of the “Dress Tent” series, *Dashboard Hula Girl* was significant in that it explored the particularities of Pao’s own personal journey to seek out and reclaim elements of her own identity as a diasporic Native Hawaiian, a theme that has emerged as a key point of focus in the artist’s work over the last several years.<sup>4</sup> Pao chose the dashboard hula girl as a seemingly unlikely creative influence to inform her search. Replete with wiggling spring-action hips, bobbing head, faux grass skirt, and coconut bra—the dashboard hula girl has long been perceived as a trope of corporate tourism in the Islands and is linked to what many Hawaiians consider to be the predatory appropriation and commodification of their culture. More broadly, the dashboard hula girl is seen to promote the gendering of Hawai‘i under the sign of “she,” “the Western image of the Native ‘female’ in her magical allure.”<sup>5</sup> As an artifact of tourism and, in a deeper way for many, a symbol of the ongoing U.S. colonial project, the “Little Brown Gal” with her gyrating hips would seem to fit squarely with what Hawaiian activist and scholar Haunani-Kay Trask lambasted as the prostitution of Hawaiian culture.<sup>6</sup> But rather than disavowing this paragon of kitsch, in *Dashboard Hula Girl* Pao—in collaboration with Lasser—instead embraces her as kinswoman and grafts her into a personal narrative of place, belonging, and genealogical connection.

Standing at an imposing height of ten feet and extending fourteen feet in diameter, *Dashboard Hula Girl* exuded a larger-than-life presence in the gallery (Figures 1 and 2).<sup>7</sup> The external structure of the piece was covered with a thick layer of tan-colored raffia, the purpose of which was to emulate both a traditional Hawaiian grass hut and a grass hula skirt. At the apex of the installation was an opening through which different female performance artists emerged over the course of the *‘Ae Kai* exhibition by climbing a ladder that was concealed within the structure of the piece. As each woman materialized from the faux-grass form, they transformed into a living, breathing, animated representation of the dashboard hula girl. Crowds of people gathered to watch the unfolding drama as each woman offered her own interpretation of the dashboard maiden muse. In the background, a large-scale video projection cast



*Figure 1 Wide shot of Dashboard Hula Girl: In Search of Aunty Keahi, 2017. Image courtesy of Adrienne Keahi Pao and Robin Lasser.*

images of a hula girl figurine erected on a car dashboard. A montage of scenes showed the view of the dashboard hula girl as she was transported across two geographies, California and Hawai‘i—Pao’s birth home and her ancestral home, respectively. While in the California scenes the dashboard hula girl’s gaze was toward the driver, on the Hawai‘i drive her focus was trained on the unfolding landscape before her. The conceptual premise here was that with her attention on the scene in front—a visual feast of lush Hawaiian foliage as it flashed by in a blur of verdant green—the dashboard hula girl, as a proxy for Pao herself, was effectively “reclaiming her gaze” of home.<sup>8</sup>

*I watch in rapt silence as the woman begins to move her body in slow, choreographed motion, the muscles of her torso synched taut as her sinewy arms and agile hips perform a slow-motion hula. Each movement she makes comprises the space of a single breath, each breath she exhales bears the genesis of the next moment. She is impervious to my attentive gaze or, for that matter, the curious stares of the crowd that has gathered to witness the spectacle. Her dexterous frame is enclosed by the edifice she inhabits, a hybrid dome that functions as both grass hut and grass skirt. The dashboard hula girl carries both her house and the accoutrements of her profession on her body—she has everything she needs. She surveys the onlookers below, unsmiling, her lovely hula hands flowing to the tune of a song we cannot hear. Moving pictures flicker on a large white screen in the near distance. They show the dashboard hula girl in motion, traveling along routes that she has traveled many times between the two worlds she calls home.*



Figure 2 *Midshot of Dashboard Hula Girl: In Search of Aunty Keabi*, 2017. Image courtesy of Adrienne Keabi Pao and Robin Lasser, 2017.

As a diasporic Hawaiian, Pao inhabits the “space-between-worlds” of being and belonging that *Dashboard Hula Girl* represented. Although born and raised in Oakland, California, during the course of her lifetime the artist has returned frequently to her father’s homeland of Hawai‘i to reconnect with place and kin. In this regard, she has made many crossings between birth home and ancestral hearth. But as an “off-Island” Hawaiian, Pao’s experience echoes that of many others who must negotiate their insider/outsider status. These people exist within the liminal realm that is the ‘ae kai of the diasporic experience. States Pao, “Everything for me is always the experience of insider and outsider at the same time.”<sup>9</sup> Hawaiian scholar Kēhaulani Kauanui has written extensively about Hawaiians who are born and raised away from the Islands, noting that for many the process is often one of alienation and uprooting.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, *Dashboard Hula Girl* is significant in the way Pao uses the work to *reroot* herself and thus reaffirm—indeed, proclaim—her genealogical and physical connection to Hawai‘i.

If the exterior of *Dashboard Hula Girl* was a site of staged spectacle depicting the transformation of Hawaiian culture—specifically hula—into touristic commodity, the interior of the installation offered a more private and introspective space for contemplating the lived reality of hula that lies concealed beneath the cliché. To do this, Pao drew upon the wellspring of stories that emanate from her own family concerning the relationship between three noteworthy women: acclaimed kumu hula (hula teacher) and dancer



Figure 3 Young girl tracing with her fingers the stitched narrative of *Dashboard Hula Girl's interior*, 2017.. Image courtesy of Adrienne Keahi Pao and Robin Lasser.

Keahi Luahine and two of the women she taught, Dinah Gomes Sylvester Pao—the artist's tutu (grandmother) on her father's side—and 'Iolani Luahine, who became a celebrated kumu hula and dancer in her own right.

As the second part of the installation's title *In Search of Aunty Keahi* implies, Keahi Luahine served as a central touchstone for the artist in helping her trace not only the connections between the three women but as well *her* connection to *them*. Importantly, although Pao is not genealogically related to Keahi, she nevertheless is linked relationally to her through her tutu Dinah Pao and by the salient fact that at birth she was bestowed with Keahi's name. Inside the installation—which simultaneously felt like the interior of a hale hula (place where hula is taught) or the protective domain of a womb—the story of ancestral connections was told through an immersive environment of visuals and soundscape. Lining the entire space was a layer of white gauze, which was embroidered with black text that relayed in written form the intertwined history of the three women (Figure 3). One line read, “Aunty Keahi helped raise Tutu and trained her in hula. Keahi was also the primary kumu of her hanai [adopted] daughter, renowned dancer 'Iolani Luahine.” Another line read: “In search of Aunty Keahi Luahine 1877–1937 was told in a dream. Keep her ancestral line of Kanuena hula from Kaua'i alive.” The invocation of names, dates, and places stitched meticulously onto the material read like an 'oli hula



Figure 4 Tī leaf with a chant written on the surfaces, 2017. Image courtesy of Adrienne Keahi Pao and Robin Lasser.

(hula chant) or a pule (prayer) that seemed to echo across temporal zones, connecting the past with the present and, in turn, connecting Pao directly to the women.<sup>11</sup> Resonating in the space the voice of Keahi Luahine could be heard chanting “Eia o Ka Lani Ka Manomano” (“Here is the Chief, the Great One”). The chant came from a rare recording of Keahi that was made in the 1930s. Pao’s father had found it in the Smithsonian’s archival audio files during his own search for her years previously. The artist transcribed the chant into English and wrote the words on tī leaf—a plant used by Hawaiians to make hula skirts and which has powerful healing properties—which Pao and Lasser arranged on the floor in front of the entrance like a ritual offering for guests to read (Figure 4). The interior, with its soft lighting, was imbued with a sense of calm and quietude. It felt like a pu‘uhonua (sanctuary).

*I sit alone on the laubala mat immersing myself in the mana (power) of a space that is at once feminine womb and sacred sanctuary—a place of birthing and safety. Here ancestral lines are protected and kept alive by the telling of stories that return the Seeker to the source. The voice of a woman crosses the threshold of time to commemorate the Great One: “O ka lani ka hiapo kama kapu, ka hānau mua iā Hawai‘i. The chief who is eldest sacred child, the firstborn to Hawai‘i.” As she chants two young women dance in unison; they are joined not by blood but by ancient tradition and a shared connection to their kumu (source, teacher). Their movements are precise and fluid, just as they were taught. The woman’s words rise like a prayer and escape through an opening in the roof. They are released. The light casts shadow-words on the walls, which leap out and fall around my shoulders like a lei of memories interlinked; they are not my own but those of the Seeker and those who descend from the*

*origin of those memories. I do not sense time passing. The dance ends and it is time for me to leave. The women do not see me depart.*

*Dashboard Hula Girl: In Search of Aunty Keahi* was at once a work of art and a site of embodied ancestral connection and ritual encounter. As a Native daughter born and raised away from the Islands, Pao conveyed meaningful insight into the complexities and struggles of what it is to exist in the in-between space of the diasporic experience. It is within this dynamic set of conditions that Pao launched her search for Aunty Keahi and, in so doing, cast her eyes to the source—as the above epigraph attests—of her cultural heritage. It remains to be seen what new works will emerge from Pao’s ongoing quest. It will no doubt involve many crossings between birthplace and ancestral piko (center). And self. Mostly self.

\* \* \*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Greg Dening, “Performing on the Beaches of the Mind: An Essay,” *History and Theory* 41 (2002): 1–24.

<sup>2</sup> Over the course of their ten year collaboration on the Dress Tent series, Pao and Lasser have worked with a number of other artists, including: Kovid Kapoor and Akshit Bhardwaj (Dress Tent skirt design and fabrication), Christy Chow (interior installation fabric design), and Kernen Dibble (arduino and dress form “wiggle” element). Other resources that were drawn upon in the conceptualization and creation of *Dashboard Hula Girl* were: Sam ‘Olu Gon III, Leilani Mokihana Pao, the Pao Family, Smithsonian APAC, and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. For more of Pao’s and Lasser’s work, go to: [www.dresstents.com](http://www.dresstents.com), [www.adriennepao.com](http://www.adriennepao.com), and [www.robinlasser.com](http://www.robinlasser.com).

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Megan Miller, “The Bizarre Wearable Architecture of the Tented Ladies,” *Co.Design*, 9 September 2016, <https://www.fastcodesign.com/3063551/the-bizarre-wearable-architecture-of-the-tented-ladies>

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the “Hawaiian Cover-up” series at <https://www.adriennepao.com/hawaiian-cover-ups/>

<sup>5</sup> Haunani-Kay Trask, “Lovely Hula Hands’: Corporate Tourism and the Prostitution of Hawaiian Culture,” In *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty* (Hawai‘i: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1999), 136–137.



<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 136–147.

<sup>7</sup> The gallery space was a defunct supermarket located in the Ala Moana Mall in Honolulu and was filled with works by over fifty other artists and practitioners from Hawai'i and abroad.

<sup>8</sup> Robin Lasser and Adrienne Keahi Pao, *'Ae Kai: A Culture Lab on Convergence* exhibition proposal, author's personal files.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Laura Kina, "Hawaiian Cover-Ups: An Interview with Adrienne Pao" In *War Baby/Love Child: Mixed Race Asian American Art*, edited by Laura Kina and Wei Ming Dariotis (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 125.

<sup>10</sup> See Kēhaulani Kauanui, "Diasporic Deracination and 'Off-Island' Hawaiians," *The Contemporary Pacific* 19 (1): 137–160.

<sup>11</sup> The interior installation fabric design was done by Hong Kong based artist Christy Chow. To see her work, go to <https://www.christy-chow.com/>.