

The Fire That Birthed Community Heroes: August 8, 2023

M. Kawēlau Wright

Kamakakūokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

Keywords: • Native Hawaiian • Lahaina • Fire • Community • Resilience

Abstract

This poem centers on my adult nephew, who has autism and verbal communication challenges, as a survivor of the Lahaina wildfire. I use his perspective to highlight the Lahaina community's ongoing response, refusal, and resistance since the August 2023 disaster. The poem focuses on the heroic resilience of community members whose need for survivor housing caused them to occupy Ka‘anapali beach for nearly six months and take on the political issue of Maui’s lack of housing for its long-term, permanent residents.

Indigenization Statement

I am a Native Hawaiian generational resident of Maui, Hawai‘i. I am currently an Assistant Professor at the Kamakakūokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies in the Hawai‘inuiākea School of Hawaiian Knowledge at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. I approach my research as both an insider and a scholar, wholeheartedly embracing my responsibilities to my community. My family almost lost our brother and his family in the 2023 Lahaina fires, and this piece reflects that experience. It also communicates the resilience of Native Hawaiians who were directly affected by the fire yet pushed forward to speak truth to power in many political, social, and economic landscapes. This work is dedicated to these heroes.

Introduction

When the Lahaina fires burned in August 2023 (Klein & Sproat, 2023), I watched helplessly from O‘ahu. Our ‘ohana (family) then endured nearly a week of not knowing whether our brother and his family of four had made it to safety or perished alongside more than one hundred other Lahaina residents. They came horrifyingly close to losing their lives that day, forced to flee on foot and ultimately rescued by a Pacific Islander who used his truck to save

people he did not know. This poem centers on my adult nephew, who has autism and verbal communication challenges, and his experience as a Native Hawaiian generational Lahaina resident. It also highlights the community's long-term response, refusal, and resistance since that fateful day.

This poem features line breaks that reflect intentional pauses in its spoken delivery. It uses repetition to help the reader understand the heroic community responses led by the victims themselves, in an effort to improve conditions not only for themselves but also for the broader community across Maui and Hawai'i. It is my hope that the reader will gain a glimpse into Hawai'i's complicated settler-privileged landscape and the work the Lahaina community is doing to bring dignified housing equity to all generational residents of Maui.

The Fire That Birthed Community Heroes: August 8, 2023

"On August 8th, Everything Went to Shit." This is what my adult nephew, who has autism, says when you ask what happened the day of the Lahaina fires...

...What he won't say is how quickly the fire moved due to the hurricane-force winds, how they didn't realize buildings less than a block away were burning until they were, and how he and his 'ohana (family) almost died that day. There will be no discussion of him and his family getting into their car without any belongings - his mother without footwear, even - but they were unable to exit their apartment's parking lot because none of the other drivers would let them into traffic...

...Or that they abandoned their car to attempt escape on foot for nearly a mile, with burns on their feet and legs as a result. He won't explain how a young Pacific Islander man told them to get into the back of his truck, alongside other strangers he was collecting, while seeking safety himself. Or how that young man saved their lives with his truck bed filled with people while so many other drivers sat in gridlock alone in their cars, forming a stationary web of singly-occupied vehicles trying to escape the heat, flames, and death...

...Two years later, we still have no idea who that young Pacifica man is and are unable to properly thank him for being our family's hero that day.

My nephew's autism will keep him from explaining that fire survivors who lost everything, including their homes, were put up in hotels and condominiums, having to rely on community hubs for food, medicine, and everything else needed for day-to-day survival...

...Or that the County of Maui reopened for tourism while survivors were still grieving the loss of homes, friends, and family members, while forcing them to live alongside carefree visitors enjoying their experience of paradise...

...Or just how truly demeaning that felt - So belittling, in fact, that some of these survivors occupied Ka'anapali Beach for nearly six months to advocate for long-term dignified housing for fire victims through the conversion of a specific list of tourist-centered, short-term rentals...

He won't be able to share that those same survivors have become modern-day warriors standing up to keep people from Lahaina in Lahaina, instead of adding to the ongoing forced outmigration to the American continent by being priced out of their homeland. This outmigration has resulted in more Native Hawaiians living outside of Hawai'i than in the place that raised and cared for generations of their family...

...Or how this fight continues today, with the Maui County Council set to vote on this contentious issue soon, airing publicly their choice for Maui's future population: Tourism and settlers, or Native Hawaiians and generational Maui residents...

...Voting to end this list of short-term rentals would provide almost seven thousand long-term rental units for people of Lahaina, Maui, and, more broadly, Hawai'i. It would also say to those of us of Hawai'i that they care more about us than the visitor counts and investment dollars.

My nephew will not explain that many community heroes, most unsung, have emerged since the fires, providing hope for a future in Hawai'i that includes Native Hawaiians and long-time residents...

...Or how grateful we are to the people of Lahaina for standing up, sacrificing, and resisting during your worst nightmare, for your inspiration as resilient role models that we will emulate and reproduce across Hawai'i...

...Details of your strength will be shared alongside the thousands of important stories connected to Lahaina...

...Mahalo to you all for encouraging us to remember what community means and speaking truth to power since August 8, 2023, when everything went to shit.

Reference

Klein, N., & Sproat, K. (2023, August 17). Why was there no water to fight the fire in Maui? *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/aug/17/hawaii-fires-maui-water-rights-disaster-capitalism>