

# Service Connected

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Photography, Mixed Media, and Fiber Arts  
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*As a Kanaka wahine and a U.S. Army veteran, I embody the contradiction of what it means to be both an American and a Native Hawaiian living in an occupied territory. My training as an artist is primarily in photography, mixed media, and fiber arts, allowing me to tell my autobiographical stories using materials from my life experiences. In this body of work, I transformed my U.S. Army uniforms into 100 pieces of paper. This has been called combat paper by the Combat Paper Project, a larger community project with other veterans. I adopted their conceptual framework in my papermaking; however, I did not participate in a larger collective due to the pandemic. My work was done at home, alone, and in isolation. To address the insidious trauma of my confined domestic space, I chose to frame the work as a private non-theatrical performance. Using performance art in my papermaking allows me to embody the material and be present in my creative space.*

*As I performed the papermaking, I transformed myself; my pain, sacrifice, and service. Through repetition, rhythm, and working with the material for prolonged periods, I became mindful of the role of art in creating personal resilience in the face of diverging levels of trauma that otherwise serve to fracture one's identity and belonging. I have discovered that love and service are connected in complex ways.*

*As I composed and sequenced this book, I used my critical and creative lens to dismantle and decolonize the trauma deeply imbued in the woven threads of my experiences. I juxtapose words in 'ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian language) with my paper to represent the complexity of my identity. Using 'ōlelo Hawai'i signifies a reclamation of a once suppressed language by the same government that I served. Behind the words, I subtly weave in the Kū'ē Petitions to show my solidarity and the collective resistance and resilience of the lāhui.*

*<http://www.uhmbfa2021.com/2021/03/20/ruth-kaneko/>*

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I am a Kanaka wahine (Native Hawaiian woman), born and raised on the island of O'ahu in Hawai'i. I graduated from Kamehameha Schools (2003) and served eight years on active duty in the U.S. Army as a combat medic. As an undergraduate in the Bachelor of Fine Arts program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, I explore themes of identity, trauma, and resilience in my art practice. My artwork is a way for me to grapple with these two parallel, yet sometimes conflicting, origins of trauma: my identity as a Kanaka and my identity as a United States Veteran. [ruthkaneko.com](http://ruthkaneko.com) IG: @ruth.kaneko

As an undergraduate in the Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM), I explore themes of identity, trauma, and resilience in my artwork. As a Kanaka Maoli (native Hawaiian person)<sup>1</sup> and a U.S. Army veteran, I embody the contradiction of what it means to be an American and a Native Hawaiian living in an occupied territory. My personal genealogy is inextricably sutured to the genealogy of the lāhui (nation of Hawaiian people), yet my experience is connected to my time in service as a combat medic. These conflicting identities and loyalties create ambivalence. My exploration of these themes in my art practice attempts to weave together my experiences in ways that honor the complexity of my life. I will process and describe my project, *Service Connected*, within the context of decolonization. I also aim to address the lived trauma I have experienced as I navigate my isolated domestic space during COVID-19. I discover the role of art in creating personal resilience in the face of diverging levels of trauma that otherwise serve to fracture one's identity and belonging.

## Concept

### PROBLEM AND ARTISTIC INQUIRY

Trauma can be personal, intergenerational, and cultural. In this project, I focus on personal trauma from war, the intergenerational trauma that has been passed down to me from my kūpuna (ancestors), and the cultural trauma that I continue to experience as I learn about colonialism and militarism in Hawai'i. I draw on the stories of resilience that are embedded in these identities and histories. In my artistic inquiry, I explore the systems that have both created and fractured aspects of my identity: colonization and militarization. Hawai'i has been illegally occupied by the U. S. since the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893. Hawai'i has been and continues to be subjugated and objectified by colonial control, keeping Hawai'i under the colonial gaze<sup>2</sup> ever since foreigners came ashore and saw it as something to be possessed, controlled, and conquered (Turnbull, Ferguson).

Hawaiians are groomed to join the military, to serve the same government that silenced their kūpuna. I challenge the western mindset of ownership, property, and control. In the Hawaiian language, everything is classified by Kino'ō and Kino'a. Kino'ō are things that cannot be controlled, innate, and not able to be possessed. Kino'a is the opposite ("Which Kino? o or a."). Āina means land, and it falls under kino'ō, which

means that it cannot be owned or controlled. As Kanaka, we are protectors of the land; we must hi'ipoi (tend) it and mālama (care for) it.

Currently, there are eleven U.S. military bases in Hawai'i, including a base for all five branches of the military. The U.S. military owns or controls more than 200,000 acres, about 5% of Hawai'i's land (Kelly 255–57). Military presence in Hawai'i has greatly benefited military recruitment numbers. There are a disproportionate number of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in the military. A study in 2003 indicated that Pacific Islanders, which includes Native Hawaiians, joined the U.S. Army at a rate 249% higher than that of other ethnic groups (Kane). Native Hawaiians have fought in America's battles from the War of 1812 to the present day in Iraq and Afghanistan. Hawaiians join the military for tradition, often their fathers and grandfathers served. They join because the military is the only avenue to survive the high cost of living in Hawai'i (Knodell). An American Community Survey in 2017 indicated that the poverty rate for all Hawai'i residents was 9.5%, while Native Hawaiians were 13.5% (Hofschneider). Military recruitment targets lower-income communities with promises of college, health benefits, and patriotism. American nationalism was deeply embedded in my upbringing. As a young child, I was taught the Pledge of Allegiance. We sang Hawai'i Pono'ī after the Star-Spangled Banner, and I always wondered why the Hawaiian flag flies beneath the American flag. When I decided to join the Army, I bought into the false narrative of being a patriot.

### CONNECTION TO MY IDENTITY

My personal narrative provides essential background for my project, *Service Connected*. When I was nineteen, I joined the Army (Active Duty), wanting to be a part of something bigger than myself, serve my country, and sacrifice for the greater good. I became a medic because I wanted to help people. I learned quickly that I could thrive, focus, and function under pressure and in high-stress situations. I thought I was prepared for war but soon realized that nothing can ever really prepare you. The old military saying "war is hell" could not be more accurate. I was twenty years old; I had never seen or experienced anything like it. This country was filled with hostility, poverty, and death. I did two tours in Iraq and eight years in the Army total. I was honorably discharged at 28 years old as a Sergeant.<sup>4</sup>

When I returned home to Hawai'i, my body was ridden with health problems connected to my time in service. I was on a lot of medications and had undergone four back surgeries. Besides the physical pain, I struggled with the mental and psy-

1 I use Kanaka, Kanaka Maoli and Native Hawaiian interchangeably.

2 Colonial Gaze: A panoptic gaze whose objective is to control racial differences by exoticizing, feminizing, and primitivizing. This gaze's power is often achieved through projection, which places "otherness" onto another (Philippi 71–80).

3 Hawai'i Pono'ī is Hawai'i's official anthem, originally the national anthem of the Kingdom of Hawai'i.

4 I was honorably discharged from the U.S. Army in December 2013.

chological pain of what I had been through. I became angry, depressed, and unable to find peace. Following my experiences at war, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. My symptoms were becoming debilitating and affecting every aspect of my life, so I sought help through the Veterans Association and began intense therapy.

After several years in therapy, I became emboldened to enroll in college when I was 32. I began to understand that this personal trauma was related to a more significant cultural trauma. During my undergraduate studies at UHM, I learned the true history of Hawai'i, the overthrow, and the illegal annexation of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893. I read *Hawai'i's Story by Hawai'i's Queen*, the story of the overthrow of my native country written by Queen Lili'uokalani, the last reigning monarch of the Kingdom of Hawai'i. I was overwhelmed with the pain my ancestors must have felt, and I knew that it was my pain as well. It was the pain of intergenerational trauma passed down to me from my kūpuna before me.

On January 17, 1893, a group of Americans living in Hawai'i known as the Committee of Safety seized control of 'Iolani Palace.<sup>5</sup> According to the University of Hawai'i Law review in 1995, the committee backed by 160 armed U.S. Marines abolished the monarchy and proclaimed themselves as head of the provisional government until the U.S. annexation could be negotiated. The Queen, wanting to avoid any bloodshed of her people, gave a temporary surrender.<sup>6</sup> She believed that the U.S. would do the right thing and return Hawai'i, but this was not the case. The Republic of Hawai'i, an oligarchy controlled by American citizens, replaced the provisional government on July 4, 1894 (University of Hawai'i Law Review 1995, 466). It was known that the strategic location of Hawai'i in the Pacific would allow the U.S. to have military superiority. In 1898, the U.S. Senate failed to ratify the treaty, and with new president William McKinley in office, Hawai'i was annexed under a Joint Resolution.<sup>7</sup>

In a letter to her hānai (adoptive) daughter, Queen Lili'uokalani in 1917 wrote,

I could not turn back the time for the political change, but there is still time to save our heritage. You must remember never to cease to act because you fear you may fail. The way to lose any earthly

kingdom is to be inflexible, intolerant, and prejudicial. Another way is to be too flexible, tolerant of too many wrongs, and without judgment at all. It is a razor's edge. It is the width of a blade of pili grass. To gain the kingdom of heaven is to hear what is not said, to see what cannot be seen, and to know the unknowable—that is Aloha. All things in this world are two; in heaven there is but one. (Marsella, 274)

The Queen had many conflicts within herself as she navigated a situation of imperial greed impinging on the Hawaiian Kingdom. I can relate to the helplessness she must have felt within her heart but also have to act on her resolve. Through it all, she inspired her people to be 'onipa'a, to be steadfast, established, firm, resolute, and determined (Pukui 289). Reading the Queen's words and learning about the history of colonization and occupation in Hawai'i helped me identify my roots of my own trauma and resolve. Noenoe Silva, a prominent Kanaka activist, explains Hawai'i's resistance in her book *Aloha Betrayed*. In 1897, women from *Hui Aloha 'Āina* traveled across Hawai'i to obtain signatures from Native Hawaiians for a petition against the annexation of Hawai'i, this document became known as the *Kū'e Petitions*. As a result, 38,000 Native Hawaiians<sup>8</sup> signed the petitions to send to the United States regarding the annexation, hoping that they would return Hawai'i's independence.

After learning about these petitions, I searched the electronic document for my family's name. Finally, I found my family name in the region of North Kohala on the island of Hawai'i. When I saw our name, Kānehailua, I cried and was overwhelmed with pride but also pain. I was proud because I knew my kūpuna had taken a stand and said 'a'ole (no). However, I was sad because I knew that even though they said 'a'ole, Hawai'i was still illegally annexed. Since then, Native Hawaiians have continued the fight towards sovereignty and rights for the lāhui Hawai'i.

After discovering my family's protest, I searched for my mo'okū'auhau (genealogy) through stories of mana wāhine (strong women) in Hawai'i. I read *From a Native Daughter* by Haunani-Kay Trask and felt incredibly connected to her journey.<sup>9</sup> I learned of the Hawaiian Renaissance of the 70s and how the lāhui came together to revitalize the Hawaiian culture

5 'Iolani Palace was the seat of Hawai'i's government and the residence for the reigning monarch.

6 Queen Lili'uokalani states: Until such as the government of the United States shall, upon the facts being presented to it, undo the action of its representative and reinstate...[her] as the constitutional sovereign of the Hawaiian Islands.

7 A legislative measure, which requires the approval of both chambers and, with one exception, is submitted (just as a bill) to the president for possible signature into law. Joint Resolution of Annexation of July 7, 1898, 30 Stat. 750; 2 Supp. R.S. 895.

8 Upon Captain Cook's arrival in 1778, the Native Hawaiian population was estimated around 400,000 (already depleted from 1,000,000 people a century before). In 1900, there were an estimated 38,000 Native Hawaiians alive.

9 Haunani-Kay Trask: When I went away, I understood the world as a place and a feeling divided in two: one *haole* (white), and the other *kānaka* (native). When I returned ten years later with a Ph. D., the division was sharper, the lack of connection more painful. *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaii*. University of Hawaii Press, 2005.

through hula (Hawaiian dance), ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian language), music and traditional cultural practices (“Cultural Renaissance”). I was shaken to my core when I watched a video featuring Trask on the rotunda of ‘Iolani Palace on January 17, 1993 (the 100th anniversary of the overthrow). She shouted with her fist raised, “We are not American! We will die as Hawaiians; we will never be American!” (Anowar).

I embody the personal trauma of war but also the generational trauma of my lāhui and kūpuna. My personal PTSD is inextricably woven into the history of trauma in the Hawaiian Kingdom. The past and the present resonate and vibrate with each other, and the scars of colonization and militarization continue to interrupt how I navigate life here in Hawai‘i.

I reflect on my service and how I have been a part of the same military that once overthrew the Kingdom of Hawai‘i and suppressed the Hawaiian culture. Trask’s words re-connected me to what I had forgotten that I am Hawaiian. In Iraq, I saw the toll war takes on the mental health of the soldier. Doing the same thing every day, seeing the same people all while being fired upon with rockets and bombs, challenges the mental health of even the strongest soldier. I have witnessed the tragedy of soldiers taking their own lives. The images of their deaths have never left me. I look back now on those moments I had as a soldier in war. The moments that I keep locked away but seem to find their way back like wounds that never heal.

Looking deeper beneath the surface of everything with a critical lens has allowed me to see things that I would have never seen before. Things I used to tolerate; I no longer do. Things that were too painful to look at, I look deeper and question why they are too painful. For example, after I learned about the Vietnam war and looked deeper, I truly understood my war, the Iraq war. I realized that even though I needed to function as a soldier to survive, I still fought on the side of the colonizer and the oppressor. I saw the vicious cycle of war in the U.S. and how we continue to send soldiers off to war on false pretenses.

## CONTEXT

In Hawaiian culture, kuleana means responsibility, right, privilege, concern (Pukui 179). Kuleana falls under Kino‘ō. When I was two, my mother passed away, and my paternal grandmother raised me. Now, she is 89 years old, with cancer, dementia, and diabetes, and it is my kuleana to take care of her. This past year, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been my kuleana to protect her. All of my own vulnerability, experiences, and training have prepared me for this role as a caregiver. Going to school full-time and caring for her have been the hardest things I have done in my life. There have been times when assisting my grandmother; I felt it was more challenging than being at war in Iraq. At times it has felt like imprisonment, a sentence with no end within sight. I recognize that isolation and the strain of war on my psyche greatly influenced my mindset during my time in quarantine. I use my art prac-

tice to explore these hidden domestic spaces that hold equally important stories of survival and resilience and the shadows of colonialism and militarism.

## CREATIVE INVESTIGATION

To explore my ambivalence through my artwork, I decided to transform my Army uniforms. My uniforms not only represent my military service but also represent my experience with the U.S. military institution. Through the physical transformation of my uniforms, I can mentally and emotionally transform myself. Because I was in quarantine and doing school remotely from home, I did not have access to a papermaking studio. Therefore, I had to find a way to carve out a creative space both physically and mentally in my house. I decided to create a makeshift studio in my garage.

I used the Hollander beater in the UHM Art Department to create pulp out of my uniforms to make paper. However, I kept finding it challenging to find time to make the paper at home. My grandmother needed more of my time. I was exhausted from online school and the confinement of this pandemic. I was depleted. Every time I thought about the project, I got upset, anxious and avoided it because it seemed impossible, just another thing to add to my long list of responsibilities. Thoughts raced through my mind about the paper. Then finally, one day, I decided to start with making the paper itself.

## DESCRIPTION

For my BFA exhibition *Service Connected*, I transformed my U.S. Army uniforms into 100 pieces of paper. This has been called combat paper by the Combat Paper Project (CPP), a larger community project with other Veterans. I adopted their conceptual framework in my papermaking; however, I did not participate in a larger collective due to the pandemic. My work was done at home, alone, and in isolation. To address the insidious trauma of my confined domestic space, I chose to frame the work as a private non-theatrical performance. My task was to create 100 pieces of paper and to track the necessary changes—internal and external—in my life to make that happen. When I performed, I noticed that the creative space I made allowed me to become more mindful of myself and my thoughts. I channeled my anxiety and stress into the rhythm and repetition of the papermaking. I didn’t want my time to end; it became my escape. The hardest part of my performance was carving out a creative space from my daily duties as a caregiver. This entailed also carving out a metaphorical space to dislodge the passing on of intergenerational trauma. I knew that if I didn’t carve out a space for creating or flourishing, I am not practicing or building resilience. I set a goal to make 100 pieces. I did this because it was both possible and impossible. Possible because of my determination but impossible because of the sheer amount and the hardship of my everyday

life. Against all odds, I completed them. I photographed and recorded my process with my phone.

Because of the COVID-19, the UHM BFA 2021 exhibition was held online, digitally. This was problematic at first because my paper is a tangible object with ridges, texture, and detail. I used my training as a soldier and artist to adapt. I decided to create a book that would showcase each piece of paper. After completing the 100, I took photographs of each sheet, then I digitally composed a book with the paper's digital images, including process photos and other media.

## Methodology

My training as an artist is primarily in photography, mixed media, and fiber arts, allowing me to tell my autobiographical stories using materials from my life experiences.

## MATERIALS

A uniform worn through military service carries with it stories and experiences deeply imbued in the woven threads. Creating paper and artwork from these fibers releases the stories held within the matrix of the threads. A part of working with my uniform is understanding the fabric itself, the structure, what it is made of, and how it is made. I pay close attention to how I dismantle it and how it separates. Understanding the fabric and structure is essential because it helps me determine how to transform it into paper physically. It also allows me to prepare for the transformation mentally. For my paper, I used my Army Combat Uniforms, which comprises 50% cotton and 50% nylon. I saved my uniforms because they represented a significant part of my life. They were a sort of skin that protected me but also exposed me to trauma.

I chose to use the technique of papermaking because it allows me to create a space for contemplation and reflection, which is central to dealing with ambivalence. The cool feel of the mixture of water and pulp in the vat on my hands and arms, the sequence of steps, the repetition of movements allow me to be mindful and focus. Paper itself is a tangible object, and that is especially important in this ever-changing digital world. The transformation and repurposing of synthetic and natural materials into an object that can be used interests me.

I use photography as a form of exploration and self-expression. In my papermaking performance, photography serves to document my process and convey an abstract vision of my contemplation and reflection.

## PROCESS

I transformed my uniforms into 100 pieces of paper through a process of deconstruction, reconstruction, and reclamation. Deconstruction is the act of sacrificing a meaningful article of

clothing that involves commitment. Taking apart a garment is a labor-intensive, time-consuming action that can conjure memories and repressed thoughts attached to it. I cut up the uniform into 1"x1" pieces. As I cut it into pieces, I deconstruct the memories, traumas, and feelings associated with the uniform. The cut pieces of uniform are beaten into a pulp using the Hollander beater. A few pieces of cotton rag are added to the beater to help bind the paper together. I create pieces of paper that are then pulled from the pulp and dried to make handmade paper. In this process, the fibers and memories are reconstructed into a new form, paper. Reclamation, in this case, is the process of nearly obliterating a uniform and transforming it into a work of art that offers individuals who have been at war a creative means to address what they had experienced and reclaim their lives (CPP).

In transforming the paper, I transformed myself. I became mindful of my compassion, patience, and selflessness. I became aware of my creative space and need to heal through making. The repetition and practicing mindfulness while performing the papermaking became an outlet from my reality as a caregiver. I learned the importance of mental health and practicing resilience. I worked with the paper for prolonged periods through all its stages, I know each piece intimately. Carefully looking at something for a prolonged amount of time helps address the gray areas of indifference and ambivalence. As I examined the gray pulp and paper, I explored the gray spaces in my mind.

The final part of my process with this project was composing and sequencing my book. As I compose and sequence, I used my critical and creative lens to dismantle and decolonize the trauma deeply imbued in the woven threads of my experiences. The paper itself was beautiful. I noticed that each piece was different, even if in the slightest way. No two are the same. They were the opposite of uniforms, no longer strong, woven, and protective; they had become beautiful, unique, and precious. I noticed myself handling them with the utmost care. The color was unexpected. It was gray with slight green overtones. The texture of the paper varied from piece to piece. Some pieces were smooth, depending on the thickness. Some were thin or flawed with holes and transparencies. The patterns and textures of the paper became a metaphor for my wounds, both visible and invisible. They represented life and death, past and present. These are all themes very current in my mind, my art practice, and my everyday life. Each piece of paper was important; each piece had an identity.

Sequencing them in my book was challenging at first because of the number of pieces. I had to find a way to include all 100 pieces of paper but not let the pieces get lost in the vast sea of gray. I decided not to put anything on the paper but let the paper speak for itself because each piece had so much to tell. To ensure each piece of paper kept its identity, I numbered each piece. This action embodies a conscious critique of the

military and how so many of its service members, particularly those of indigenous backgrounds, lose their individual and cultural identities when they serve.

I sequence the paper from thick to thin. This sequencing represents the deconstruction of the western uniform, the decolonization of my mind, and the dismantling of the systems that have fractured the most vulnerable. It also represents letting go of the trauma that I carry, not just what's woven in the threads of my uniforms but also within the generations of my mo'okū'auhau (genealogy) and my current everyday life. Next to the paper, I juxtapose words in 'ōlelo Hawai'i to represent the complexity of my identity. The words were carefully chosen and sequenced next to the paper to reference my experience while performing the paper making in my studio. Behind the words, I subtly weave in the *Kū'ē Petitions* to show the collective resistance and resilience of the lāhui.

A kuleana that I carry as a Kanaka is to protect and revitalize my culture. My refusal to provide an English translation to the words in 'ōlelo Hawai'i in my artwork signifies my personal resistance and solidarity with the lāhui and ongoing fight towards decolonization and Hawaiian sovereignty. In *From a Native Daughter*, Trask says, "to Hawaiians in traditional society, language had tremendous power, thus the phrase, *i ka 'ōlelo ke ola; i ka 'ōlelo ka make*—in language is life, in language is death." The Hawaiian language suffered near extinction in 1900 by an American imposed government when Hawai'i became a U.S. territory (Trask 142). In my book, including 'ōlelo Hawai'i and the *Kū'ē Petitions* with my 'ohana (family) name is my reclamation and revitalization of my culture, my language, and my kuleana as a Kanaka Maoli.

## Conclusion

Themes of identity, trauma, and resilience are woven into my work past and present. My artwork is a way for me to grapple with these two parallel yet sometimes conflicting origins of trauma: my identity as a Kanaka and my identity as a United States Veteran. Through my performance and artmaking, I learned that love and service are connected in complex ways. Love is service, sacrifice, selflessness, but it is also compassion, patience, and awareness. I learned about the love of self and that sometimes it is hard. To love yourself is to have an understanding of yourself and your space. Making space in my life to love myself is a lifelong mission. It is in my nature to serve, but true service begins within ourselves.

I discovered the role of art in creating personal resilience in the face of levels of trauma that otherwise serve to fracture one's identity and belonging. Artmaking provides a locus to vibrate and idle in the spaces of being in-between. I learned that making a conscious choice to carve out a creative space at both the personal and cultural levels is the key to long-term resilience and addressing intense issues like colonialism and

nationalism. Not only does creative engagement help me/us endure these intense issues, but it can help me/us to challenge them.

My artwork is my voice, and I can use it to reach others who may also be stuck in-between similar spaces. It is my kuleana to educate myself and others about these issues and make them aware of possibilities for dismantling and decolonizing our minds, bodies, systems, and structures. I have no regrets and would not change a thing. I am proud of the good things I did during my military service and the skills I learned; however, I recognize what the military system represents for Native people. I close this chapter of my undergraduate education, and I begin a new chapter—one with inquisition and creativity.

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