Preface

How to Read This Book

As I began to write this book, I discovered that two voices were emerging from my “self”—often speaking simultaneously. I realized that in the furthest reaches of my memory, these two voices have always existed. I thought back and found that many times in my life I acted on the intentions shaped by one or the other, but not necessarily by both of these voices.

One voice seemed to hold the shape of my rising and falling breath, sometimes seemed to enfold all my experiences into loving acceptance, yet at other times seemed to come from a place of dimly understood pain or non-integration. This voice seemed to be the privileged interpreter of experience and ancestry as a source of knowledge.

The other voice seemed to try to represent itself, wanting to categorize and explain, delighting in the process of abstracting, containing, and sometimes obscuring my experience. This voice constantly fought for closure and enjoyed grappling with every theory that could in any way explain my current reality.

In listening to these two voices I realized that over time both of these voices had developed in peculiar ways. One voice developed into my personal “self-talk” voice; another developed into my public or school voice. True, sometimes they overlapped or visited one another, or found a close harmony, maybe even a passage or two in unison. But often these voices sat up at night arguing, fought over my intention or behavior, struggled to choke one another out, even lied to one another.

Worse yet, sometimes these voices simultaneously discussed two entirely unrelated topics. At those moments I could always silence one of the voices. Or I could occupy the place between the voices, searching there for a connection between them. The place between those two voices was not a comfortable place to occupy.

As I wrote this book, I decided to let these voices do what they usually do. They tend to speak as separate voices, sometimes estranged from each other, sometimes echoing one another, sometimes
simply co-existing. I decided that it would be important for them to do that. It seemed that my “grap-
pling, struggling voice” had developed into the voice I write with when I write academically. Maybe
the academic world has offered an outlet for that sometimes distanced voice. That voice tends to take
over; it focuses on trying to win arguments.

My “self-talk” voice usually appears in the left column of these pages, which is also sometimes
occupied by letters, the voices of others, or journal entries. My academic voice usually appears in the
right column and spills over into endnotes. In fact, endnotes have become a way to try to contain that
voice. As I interview people, their voices take over the left column entirely. Their voices take the place
of my “self-talk” voice, as they offer clues to experience, ancestry, and the source of knowledge. At
those times I limit my “analysis” to the right column, because the meanings I construct in the right
column are dependent on the definitive voices of those I interviewed in the left column. This relation-
ship reflects the way that the voices of those I interviewed continue to manifest in my life.

The left and right columns of this book comprise two descriptions of the journey I have taken,
and what I learned on the way. There is also a place that lives between those two columns, those two
voices. It is where transformation occurred, and it is inhabited by dreams and symbols. In this book
that place shifts. Sometimes it arrives on the left, sometimes on the right, sometimes on both sides.
That place is without words and communicates through images or silent, empty space.

Shutting out either voice would silence that place in between those two voices. It would obscure
the threshold I occupy. That threshold is a state of knowing and not knowing, of looking in and
looking out, of feeling grounded and feeling adrift. I realize that this offers you, the reader, a difficult
challenge at times. There isn’t always a tight fit, or closure between these two voices, and the “space
in-between” can be a frustrating space to occupy.

Enter this text any way you wish. One voice may seem boring, or obscure, or over-emotional, or
stilted. Whenever something doesn’t make sense, just let it go by. Read only what you wish to read.
You may end up only on one side, or only reading sections of this text. That is probably for the best.
This book was not written to be a closed, integrated whole. That would misrepresent the nature of
the journey. I hope that in entering this text in whatever way you decide, you find something, some
voice or some silent place, which draws you.

xiv  Preface
Introduction

This book is about my attempts to understand how certain Hawaiian kupuna (elders) talk about knowledge and transformation. It is about how their knowledge led me into my Hawaiian ancestry, which, for most of my life, I believed I would never find. It is about interviewing kupuna and about the transforming power of their knowledge. As long as their knowledge connects us to those who are no longer living, our ancestry can never truly be lost.

Trying to understand the words of certain kupuna has been a journey for me. If I were to write as I wrote during most of my graduate work at University, only an incomplete road map of that journey would emerge. My dreams would not be in the story.1 The story of how my learning transformed my life would be left out.2

On the other hand, to write as if this story were only a story of personal transformation would exclude certain theories or stories about social change that I grappled with at University. My conversations with those theories were an important part of my life transformation.

According to Pukui and Elbert’s 1986 Hawaiian dictionary, kupuna means: “Grandparent, ancestor, relative or close friend of the grandparent’s generation” (186). Although Hawaiian kupuna traditionally passed down knowledge in their families, many kupuna also share certain types of knowledge outside their families.

In recent times the word kupuna has often been used to refer to elders or those of the “grandparent generation.” However, just being of a certain age is not the only determiner of who seems to be called “kupuna.” This term is often used for older people who are expert in Hawaiian culture.

Many kupuna engage in activities associated with groups such as churches, Hawaiian civic clubs, hālau hula (schools where Hawaiian dance or hula is taught), state-sponsored school programs, and sovereignty organizations.

Although it is hard to track how their knowledge is taken up, it is certain that many kupuna are esteemed because of their wisdom. This is not to say that all kupuna are leaders, or are wise, but it can be said that their voices are invoked by others in cultural and political realms.
It is strange to live at the confluence of stories of those *kūpuna* and stories I heard at University. Certainly, each sort of story offers a particular genealogy of knowledge and of knowledge production. Alone, each story has the capacity to distance me from a part of myself or from a community I enter. I harbor a sense of this distance; yet as I write, I also harbor a sense that I am being carried along by my ancestors.

Intensive recovery of language and culture is taking place among Hawaiians. Hawaiians are also retelling and interrogating history. These powerful trends are intertwined with the drive for sovereignty in Hawai‘i.

The voices of *kūpuna* are pivotal in many undertakings, threading through complex and contested discourses. These discourses, in turn, weave through the varied and fluid terrain of Hawaiian communities, urban and rural, on- and off-island.

In this book are the voices of a few *kūpuna* and people whose lives they touched. I thank those who shared their knowledge and helped me begin to understand where I come from and where I am going.