

E HO'O KAMA'ĀINA  
by Re'al Christian  
ON KIMI HOWL LEE'S  
KAMA'ĀINA (Child of the Land)

October 9 – November 16, 2020



Kimi Howl Lee, *KAMA'ĀINA*, 2020 (still). Film; 16:47. Courtesy the artist.

BIG WINDOW

*Kama'āina*, written and directed by Kimi Howl Lee, opens beneath a grove of trees on the island of O'ahu. "Kama'āina" (kā'-mā-ā'i-na) literally translates as "child of the land."<sup>1</sup> The term implies a particular system of ecological care, of existing within a landscape rather than against it, of taking root, or cultivating growth. Lee's story centers around another "child of the land," a young girl coping with newfound homelessness against the backdrop of a picturesque landscape, and taking root in new soil.

1 ko'u kama'āina, ka'u malihini,  
my host, my guest<sup>2</sup>

The film's central character is Mahina, a queer sixteen-year old girl, who has just run away from home to escape a chaotic relationship with her stepfather. When we meet her, she's frantically scrolling through her cell phone checking for activity on an Instagram account. Her phone is her most precious belonging, her only tether to the world. She leaves an angry voicemail for someone, but it's the kind of anger that suggests closeness, familiarity, and complicated intimacy. We find out later that she had been staying with her girlfriend's parents, but there was a falling out. If the dispute was between Mahina and her girlfriend, her girlfriend and her parents, or Mahina and the parents, we can only speculate through Mahina's broken conversations over the phone. Her tone, full of hurt and frustration, bears the familiar discomforts of adolescence, when things beyond one's control begin to crash down from every angle. She's apologetic yet desperate as she pleads, cusses, and bargains for reconciliation. In the time since her relationship ruptured, Mahina has been left to fend for herself on the streets of Wai'anae, a predominantly native, low-income district on the western coast of O'ahu.

As an oft forgotten section of the idyllic island, Wai'anae forms a complex setting for Lee's film. The vivid cinematography, scattered lens flares, open beaches, volcanic mountains, and cloudy pink horizons underscore the contrast between the island's beauty and the gravity of Mahina's newfound transience. Singing birds, chirping insects, and distant cars form a natural soundscape, while Lee's handheld camera movements simulate the feeling of following Mahina on her journey. The story has a personal connection for Lee, whose family spent summers in O'ahu as she was growing up. One summer, Lee had a romantic relationship with a local boy, whom she eventually discovered was homeless, a realization that "remains one of the most profound, thought-provoking experiences" of the director's life.<sup>3</sup> The cast primarily consists of first-time actors who have experienced houselessness, including the lead actress, Malia Kamalani, whose own story inspired the narrative of the film. Lee's mission with *Kama'āina* was to tell the story of the houseless population in Hawai'i, which has one of the highest homeless rates

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1 "Nowness Shorts: Kama'āina," *Nowness*. Accessed September 27, 2020. <https://www.nowness.com/series/nowness-shorts/kamaaina-kimi-howl-lee>.

2 For subtle variations on the usage of "kama'āina," see *Hawaiian Dictionary*, edited by Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986. <http://ulukau.org/elib/cgi-bin/library?c=ped&l=en>.

3 "Kama'āina (Child of the Land) by Kimi Howl Lee: Short Film," *Short of the Week*. Accessed September 27, 2020. <https://www.shortoftheweek.com/2020/08/12/kamaaina-child-land/>.

for adults and youths in the country, a statistic overshadowed by its tourist culture. “Our intention with Kama’āina,” Lee discussed in an interview with Short of the Week, “was to shed light on the staggering homeless crisis that plagues Hawai‘i’s youth, without fetishizing the hidden poverty in paradise.”<sup>4</sup>

2 *mamua ke kama’āina, mahope ka malihini,*  
first the native-born, then the stranger

Mahina’s fraught relationships with unseen characters—her girlfriend, her stepfather, her mother—each represent a delicate truce. Like any truce, there must be a compromise, an agreement between parties to limit the infliction of pain on either side. Mahina, from the point she is introduced to us, has been left with shattered truces as she struggles to regain a sense of self and place. After her strained phone call with her girlfriend, Mahina attempts to establish a different truce with her friend, Macky, with the hope that he will take her in. The two eventually agree to meet in a park in Nānākuli, a neighborhood located in Wai’anae. In a sequence of short shots, Mahina crosses various land markers, at once elongating and truncating the distance of her journey. As she navigates new territory, she finds ways to survive by taking advantage of things others often undervalue, throw away, or don’t bother to notice. She barter with an annoyed cashier at a barbeque stand for a cup of ice water after a long walk, she smuggles two candy bars out of a 7/11 using a slushy, and she steals leftover food from a curbside trash can. As a survival tactic, Mahina develops this fluid sense of ownership, reflecting on the regressive notion of private property in a land—in a country—of displaced native identity.

3 *ho’o kama’āina*  
to become acquainted with

After finding her way to Nānākuli, Mahina falls asleep in the park waiting (or hoping) for her friend’s arrival. It’s difficult to tell how much time has passed from the beginning of the film to this point, or how many sleepless nights Mahina had endured. She awakens to find her phone has been stolen. She quickly goes around the park asking strangers if they saw anyone take her phone; Lee’s rapid camera movement and a low ominous score punctuate Mahina’s distress. She makes a new acquaintance, a white woman named Sheila from a local charity. Sheila awkwardly inserts herself into Mahina’s story, even asking to speak to Mahina but proceeding with neither consent nor acknowledgement, before finally proposing a police escort to the charity shelter. It’s clear that Sheila wants to help, but there is an uncomfortable division between the two, seen most viscerally in Mahina’s recoil at the suggestion of police intervention. Sheila’s transgression and Mahina’s subsequent aversion are a clear reminder that a social contract cannot be established when the terms are not fully understood. Sheila’s insistence on taking that space and trying to establish an unwelcomed truce results in Mahina’s withdrawal; she flees the park and Sheila’s persistent advances. She loses her tether, and becomes a stranger in her own land.

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4 Ibid.

4 e ho'o kama'āina!  
make yourself at home

At the end of her journey, Mahina finds solace in “a little piece of heaven,” Pu'u honua O Wai'anae, the largest homeless camp in Hawai'i. While making the film, Lee visited the settlement and met with its “de facto governess,” Twinkle Borge, a self-identified queer woman who plays Aunt Twinkle in the film.<sup>5</sup> Here Mahina finds a community of fellow houseless residents who have reclaimed the entirety of the island as their home.

As she meets with Borge, Mahina is given a new truce, one built on mutual understanding: “You need that time, find yourself, go ahead. You need us with you, we'll stand by you.” The site of Pu'u honua O Wai'anae—hidden beneath a grove of trees—underlines a symbolic connection between care networks and roots, both ancestral and microbial. Lee's film gives us a glimpse of an unseen culture, one manifested through the queer ecology of a marginalized community to establish new environments of care. In the final shot, Mahina looks out over the vast ocean, orange and pink clouds fill the horizon. She turns back, only briefly, knowing that Aunt Twinkle is watching her, patiently standing by.

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5 Kimi Lee Howl, “Kama'āina (Child of the Land),” director statement, *FilmFreeway*. Accessed September 28, 2020. <https://filmfreeway.com/Kamaaina>