

Winter 2016

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Gordon Wetzstein

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Kristen Grauman

Autonomous Precision Landing of Space Rockets

Lars Blackmore

Water Desalination: History, Advances, and Challenges

Manish Kumar, Tyler Culp, and Yuexiao Shen

Scalable Manufacturing of Layer-by-Layer Membranes for Water Purification

Christopher M. Stafford

Engineered Proteins for Visualizing and Treating Cancer

Jennifer R. Cochran

Engineering Immunotherapy

Darrell J. Irvine

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An Interview with . . .

Kealoha



Kealoha. Photo credit: Alan Camou.

RON LATANISION (RML): Hello, Kealoha. We're so pleased to talk with you. For starters let me ask, How did you make the transition from being an MIT nuclear engineer to the world of arts and letters, and poetry in particular?

KEALOHA: It was definitely a process. The genesis of it was my internships, getting the hands-on experience of what an engineer does. What I realized was that I felt suffocated in the laboratory setting, with the fluorescent lighting, like being in a dungeon all day, the Excel spreadsheets, and then finally emerging into the world and having it be dark outside.

But there were a number of other factors at the time. My interest in the '90s was fusion energy. That's the reason I was in nuclear engineering, that's how I wanted to apply my engineering, math, and science. But in the '90s fusion energy was going through some major cutbacks. I was seeing tenured professors basically

getting laid off, I was seeing them struggle. It seemed like the political climate and the budgetary climate—even though we were talking about climate change and the energy crisis, the same problems that we're talking about now—it seemed like the world and the nation weren't ready to move in that direction.

I thought, How can I be some kind of bridge between the engineering world and the policy or financial world? So I did a couple of other internships. After one at Los Alamos National Lab, I went to Washington, DC and dug my hands into policy work. I started to get into global climate change and focus on how we could shift the narrative toward more responsible sources of energy.

CAMERON FLETCHER (CHF): What kinds of policy work were you doing?

KEALOHA: I was working with the Institute for Defense Analyses. I contributed to a white paper that summer and the thesis of it was that a number of consequences of global climate change are going to affect the DOD's bottom line. We focused on operations other than war (we called them OOTWs) and made the argument that a lot of money gets spent by the Department of Defense on OOTWs—like, for example, the crises in Rwanda or Haiti, and large-scale migrations of people. With global climate change, there will be more of those and the DOD was going to have to deal with them. Now here we are in 2016 and there's Syria and problems that have been exacerbated by global climate change or changes in the ways people do things, and immigration due to change.

RML: The interesting thing to me is that, for someone who has honors math and science credentials, when you were at MIT and working on your bachelor's, you also had a writing minor. So you must have had an inclination toward writing from an early age?

KEALOHA: I did. I was sort of straddling both worlds, although not seriously in college. To graduate from MIT, you needed to take at least eight humanities classes, but to get a minor you needed only six or so classes in a specific subject. I figured, why don't I just take most of my humanities courses in the writing department and then I'll be well on my way to having a minor.

What's really cool is that one of my favorite books at the time was *Einstein's Dreams* by Alan Lightman—and he was faculty at MIT. I thought, I'm going to go see if he'll be my advisor. He agreed and was a really cool guy. I thought, oh my gosh, I'm meeting this dude who has influenced the narrative in my mind. And then I'd see Noam Chomsky when I was walking around the campus. All these really amazing thinkers! It was a well-rounded experience there.

Alan Lightman at MIT was my advisor, and I'd see Noam Chomsky on campus. All these really amazing thinkers!

RML: When I was teaching I always tried to emphasize to the students that writing and communication skills are just as important as technical skills. If you can't communicate whatever you're doing, to a client or the Defense Department or whoever it happens to be, you're not going to be very effective, even though you may be very bright. Communication skills have always been important. At MIT there is a writing program and people like Les Perelman and Alan Lightman and others have made it a major part of the undergraduate experience at MIT. I think that's a very, very good idea for an institute of technology.

How did you get involved with slam poetry?

KEALOHA: Well, even though I did a little coursework in writing at MIT, hardly any of it was creative writing. So during those four years the creative writing section of my brain just went into hibernation mode. It was huddling like a little abandoned animal in the corner who is cold and wet and shivering.

When I left MIT I got into business consulting in San Francisco, which basically sucked my life dry. One night I said to myself, 'You know what, I'm living in San Francisco and I am not experiencing this city at all.' So I opened the paper, I think it was *SF Weekly* or *The Guardian*, and looked at the "hot picks" and one of them was a slam poetry event. I had never heard of slam poetry and didn't know what it was. But I did know that I was into poetry. During high school and even in elementary school, I was listening to hip hop and writing poems.

This event was happening right near my house, so I decided to pop down and check it out. I pay my admission and I'm sitting there and I get presented with probably some of the best slam poets in San Francisco at that time—some of the nation's best poets. And I had my mind completely blown into 20,000 fragments that all wanted to grow and become like new living entities on their own. That night my brain was tingling, my spine was all warm, and I went home and could not stop writing.

RML: That's remarkable. And that launched your activities in slam poetry, which is competitive reading, is that correct?

KEALOHA: Yes. In tennis, for example, there's the grand slam, and the slam when it comes to poetry is exactly that—it indicates that this is competitive. Performance poets get up on stage and we compete against each other for a cash prize or bragging rights or whatever it is, to up the stakes. And it's sort of a trick that we play on the audience to get them more involved in what we're doing. At the end of the day, the winner is poetry.

CHF: What is the difference between your slam poetry and your written poetry, or is the only difference the fact that one is performed out loud?

KEALOHA: It is, but here's the deal. Once you make the decision in terms of 'Do I want to be performing this in front of people or do I want them to be reading it?,' the medium helps to sculpt and define and craft the piece. So how you approach your writing changes depending on whether you want to perform it in front of people or not.

For me 99 percent of the time I've written it, memorized it, and rehearsed it over and over again. I know the script backward and forward and then I perform it as best I can, knowing that the audience is going to react in certain ways and I, the performer, am allowed to stray from the script and improvise if the moment calls for it or change the way I'm performing, depending on what the moment needs. You can change your blocking, your movements, all those things. Everything is up for interpretation.

CHF: Do you write or perform in the Hawaiian language?

KEALOHA: I definitely infuse Hawaiian words whenever the moment calls for it. But those are specific pieces. If you look at my collection, maybe 5 percent incorporate Hawaiian words. Mostly I write in English—

that's what I was born and raised speaking and it's the way I think. However, I have a Hawaiian perspective in terms of the things I was taught, so to weave the tongue of Hawai'i into what I'm doing comes pretty naturally whenever the piece calls for it.

RML: How do you choose the thematic focus of your poetry? Is it oriented toward personal experiences or politics or maybe engineering in any way? How do you identify the area you want to focus on?

KEALOHA: For me the process has always been trying to live as rich a life as possible, to observe my environment and people as well as my internal workings, for example if I'm going through some kind of emotional experience. I'm continually trying to put myself in places that expand my mind. A lot of ideas I get sort of spawn from those observations and also from conversations.

My friends know that if we're having a conversation and it sparks something in my brain, I may pull out a journal or a piece of paper and start writing while we're talking. They're cool with it. You guys probably experience the same thing as writers. You know that when you have a thought or an idea, you have to get it on paper right then and there, otherwise it's gone.

So I think and write about everything under the sun. I expect if you look at the collection of my work, there is no one thematic idea or direction except that it comes from me.

CHF: You mentioned a moment ago wanting to live as rich a life as possible and I'm wondering: You clearly were drawn to mathematics and the sciences—what do you do to satisfy the left side of your brain now?

KEALOHA: That's a great question. Science and engineering is my brain—that is how I think so I'm always using that left side. In fact, I think both hemispheres in my brain are fairly even, but if I had to place my money on what is more developed and what fires stronger and faster, it's my left side. So I don't particularly view myself as a creative person, but when I do get a creative thought I use the left side of my brain to flesh out that thought. Usually my poetry is sort of analyzing creative things.

So that left side of my brain is always being used. In fact, I just threw myself into a four-year project, a profound idea that was the thing that I wanted my life to stand for. It's a production called "The Story of Everything," where I wanted to take the science that we know now (well, in 2011 when I had the thought and began the project), everything that we know about how



Kealoha in a performance of "The Story of Everything." Photo credit: James Kimo Garrett.

humans got here, starting from the Big Bang—a whole ton of processes that have led us to today. I wanted to tell that story in a way that was fun and had plot and characters that you could enjoy, with love and hate and conflict and resolution and all those good things that make a story. I wanted to bring that to the stage so that I could communicate complex scientific processes in ways that the normal average everyday person could enjoy.

CHF: Was this a one-person performance?

KEALOHA: I like to call it a one-person performance with many people: the narrative is all me but I've got dancers, musicians, a chanter, and visual artists who have created amazing works of art projected on a screen behind us. This is a six-part multimedia experience that is everything I love and everything that I could possibly use to communicate these really complex ideas from the Big Bang to astrophysics to our solar system—all



Dancers Lorenzo Acosta (top) and Jamie Nakama (bottom) in “The Story of Everything.” Photo credit: James Kimo Garrett.

those interactions. And evolution too: once life is born as a single cell organism I’ve got to get to humans, and then I talk about the migration of humans from Africa throughout the rest of the world. The final scene is the future, in particular with regards to global climate change because that’s the thing that we need to solve right now. The whole production is 13.7 billion years’ worth of time, told in an hour and a half.

The world premiere was September 26, 2015, here in Honolulu. I had some of the best musicians here in these islands, and some of the best dancers—the best of the best helping me with this. We filmed it and now it’s about putting the footage together in a way that is appropriate for this piece. There’s a trailer on my website (www.kealohapoetry.com/the-story-of-everything.html). Since that initial production it’s toured to San Francisco, Anchorage, Tahoe, and Idyllwild (CA).

RML: Wow, what a terrific accomplishment.

KEALOHA: It almost broke me. Imagine writing about or thinking about or trying to do something for four years straight. It basically took me a year to memorize this thing. It was a hardcore process.

CHF: Even more than a PhD dissertation.

KEALOHA: Yes, that’s the way I view it, like this was my PhD thesis.

RML: Has it been in Boston or New York?

KEALOHA: Not yet but I would love, love, love to perform it in Kresge Theater at MIT. That would be amazing.

RML: I think that would be wonderful. If it becomes known to MIT that this is an interest of yours, I imagine there would be great interest in doing that.

Let me follow up on a couple of other things. You graduated from MIT in 1999, and you are now the poet laureate of the state of Hawai‘i, which is quite a remarkable accomplishment.

CHF: And you’re the first one.

RML: When did you become poet laureate?

KEALOHA: Yes, I’m the first one, it’s crazy. I was designated in 2012. A poet laureate is responsible for putting on performances, writing for state events, doing outreach to libraries and schools, traveling outside of Hawai‘i and performing, spreading the poetry of Hawai‘i—all these different things, and I had actually already been doing those things for years. When the former governor, Neil Abercrombie, was campaigning, we were at an event together and he said, ‘Kealoha, when I win I want you to do the poem for my inauguration.’ I was like, okay, cool, awesome, let’s do it. He won, and the next thing you know I was inaugurating him and then he designated me as the poet laureate. To him it made sense: the things that a poet laureate is supposed to do I was already doing.

CHF: You mentioned that one of your responsibilities is to spread the poetry of Hawai‘i, which to me evokes the poetry of others or indigenous poetry. When you travel abroad representing Hawai‘i, do you spread the word of other or former poets from ages past, or the poetry of other Hawaiians?

KEALOHA: That’s an interesting question. No, I don’t. I do chant, though. If I’m doing a chant that’s traditional and ancient, then yes, that is poetry from

a long time ago. But it kind of goes against the general code of poets and performance poets especially to perform other people's work.

CHF: That makes sense. Can you give us an example of a chant, what that would sound like?

KEALOHA: [Chants]

CHF: What was the meaning of the syllables?

KEALOHA: That song or chant talks about opening yourself up to the wisdom of the universe and allowing it to aid in this moment of song making and of sharing the knowledge.

CHF: That sounds like the approach that you bring to your poetry.

KEALOHA: Exactly. Which is why it's a chant that I often perform to open my shows.

RML: I've discovered that there are poet laureates in most of the states but not all; for example, there's none in Massachusetts. Do you meet with your colleagues from other states on any regular (or irregular) basis? Is there any communication?

KEALOHA: Yes, there is communication, primarily online. Someone will have an idea to put together a book, for example, that includes the poet laureates from as many states as possible, so they'll communicate with us about that. Or they'll let us know, 'Hey, this thing is going on here, could you make it?'

CHF: It looks from your website (www.KealohaPoetry.com) like you do a lot of work with students, particularly at the middle school level. What do you aim for when you're working with or communicating with kids?

KEALOHA: My primary goal when I'm working with kids is to get them really excited about poetry or about thinking, and to be positive about themselves. Everything else sort of falls from that—the way I approach them, the way I talk to them, the way I introduce myself, it has to be stuff that gets them excited. It also has to be stuff that's cool, because with a middle school kid, or a high school or even college student, the moment they smell that you are inauthentic or not cool, you're wasting your time and theirs. So I've developed mechanisms to break through those walls quickly and efficiently and effectively.

RML: I also see on your website that you've done some acting.

KEALOHA: A big element of performance poetry is how you're performing, so to me doing acting gigs in the beginning was a great sort of cross training for the art form that I was primarily interested in. And in high school I acted a little too. I take a great interest in the ability to communicate, so why wouldn't you immerse yourself in every aspect of communication in order to make your message more powerful.

CHF: I see that you have corporate clients—Microsoft, Mitsubishi, Subaru. What kind of work have you done with corporate clients?

KEALOHA: A number of things. Some corporations hire me to write a poem for them. Some hire me to sit in on a conference they're having and then write a poem about it. Some invite me to interact with the employees and get them to write their own poetry. And some just hire me to come and perform for them.

CHF: It's pretty fabulous that you're able to make a living as a poet.

KEALOHA: Yes, there's a number of us out there. I don't know how many exactly—it's a small enough number that whenever I tell people I make my living as a poet they're pretty incredulous. But there's enough of us out there that we have created sort of "an industry of poets" who can support themselves.

My goal when I'm working with kids is to get them really excited about poetry or about thinking, and to be positive about themselves.

RML: I'd like to return for a moment to your interaction with the governor of Hawai'i. You're obviously very concerned about the quality of life and the human condition. Do you ever talk with the governor about issues related to those kinds of topics or have you had an opportunity to pursue them in any other way?

KEALOHA: Only very briefly. With those types of individuals the amount of time that they have to dedicate to those kinds of conversations—or to you—is

minimal. But in those limited interactions, yes, you talk about whatever is in the moment and sometimes it does revolve around what's going on in the world and how we can make this world a better place.

RML: I think of global climate change and those kinds of concerns. They are clearly of interest to you, and they also have a rather odd political twist in that there are people in politics who just don't believe there's a global climate issue. Somehow technologists have got to make it clear that there are indications of climate change that are irrefutable. This is an important topic that just doesn't get attention of the right character because some people deny it happens. If you look at our current presidential process you know what I'm talking about. To me it's an indication of the fact that if people don't understand—I don't mean just political candidates but I mean the person who is interested in your poetry or in the performing arts broadly or in baseball—if people don't understand that this is a major issue for the planet, I think it may be too late when they do. That troubles me because unfortunately I meet a lot of people who just don't seem to understand that there's an issue, and whatever I may do to try to convince them otherwise, it becomes almost a political battle.

It's frustrating to see science politicized, especially important science that has to do with the future of human civilization.

KEALOHA: It's frustrating to see science politicized in this fashion, especially such important science that has to do with the future of human civilization. You can apply the same sort of framing or argument to almost every piece of science knowledge over the past hundreds of years. It's always been met with some kind of opposition from the religious or politically or financially motivated.

In all those historical instances, the thing that "solved" them is time. After a number of years or generations, eventually the scientific principles that are controversial at the time become accepted.

It's really hard to change someone's paradigm. Imagine living your life under a paradigm that is all of a sudden upheaved because of a scientific piece of knowledge that says 'Hey, the way you've been thinking about the world or the universe is wrong and you need to think about it this way.'

CHF: Some people were up in arms when they found out Pluto wasn't a planet, and that was small potatoes.

KEALOHA: Exactly. Now we start talking about the big potatoes, like say evolution or global climate change—these things are a huge sack of potatoes that changes the whole dish. If given time, we'll see that narrative change. But with global climate change the time is very limited for us to make these changes.

I guess that's why the frustration increases, because if we can't convince our leaders and the people who put them in office, if we can't convince industry, like the oil companies, and they have a huge stake in preserving their way of life or their technologies—if we can't convince them all that it's time to make significant changes, it will be too late. We may not have the kind of time necessary for scientific principles to be accepted among the general populace.

CHF: Do you put some of these concerns and ways of thinking into your poetry?

KEALOHA: Absolutely. The whole focus of part of "The Story of Everything" was global climate change and the possibilities of how that might play out as well as the solutions that we have now. I go into things like fusion energy, solar and geothermal—all framed in the context of Michael Jackson. It was a weird way to do it but when I found it I just couldn't stop laughing.

The idea was that when we were in Africa we were like Michael Jackson during his "Thriller" album: we were black and strong. Then when we migrated into Asia and the Americas and the Pacific and started to lose our pigment and become more brown, we were like Michael Jackson during the "Bad" album. And then when we migrated into Europe and just became white, we were like Michael Jackson during the "Dangerous" album. Now we're all, collectively, like Michael Jackson right before his final "This Is It" concert series: The premise is that he overdosed on prescription drugs—he was addicted to those things just like we're addicted to fossil fuels. Fossil fuels are the drug that may bring us down.

In my show there're all these references to his songs and I'm dancing, doing Michael Jackson moves and

singing his songs—it's all incorporated into the poetry and that helps move the story forward. Because my whole career has been based on trying to communicate really complex ideas in an entertaining way so that people can swallow the “medicine,” like a gel capsule that allows you to take a little bit of medicine that will get into you.

RML: That's an interesting perspective. I'm also curious, do you have any communication with people in nuclear engineering at MIT today? Do you talk to Neil Todreas or Mike Driscoll or any of the faculty that you may have known during those years?

KEALOHA: No, I don't. That'd be really cool but I've not been connected to them or had the opportunity. But if there's a reason or mode to communicate with them that you're aware of that would be interesting for both them and me then I'm game. I don't want to waste someone's time.

RML: I understand what you're saying. But I'm sure they know of your career. You're a very young man and you've accomplished a lot in a very short period since leaving MIT. It might be a nice thing for you to come back and visit because I'm sure the faculty and students would enjoy having this kind of discussion with you.

KEALOHA: I would jump at that opportunity. I have so much love in my heart for that campus and what it gave me. If it worked out, maybe I could get my crew up there and we could put on the production in its full form; and if not I'm totally open to going there solo.

RML: I still have a relationship at MIT—I have an office there, and I see the people I've just mentioned on a regular basis. So if you don't mind, I would be delighted to bring that up with them because I think this would be a great thing for the students and faculty there.

KEALOHA: Oh wow, please do, that would be awesome.

RML: I will gladly do that.

KEALOHA: Cool, thank you.

RML: Well, I'm just so impressed. You really have, in a very short period of time, distinguished yourself in a number of remarkable ways. And this is precisely what we wanted to accomplish with the column that we've introduced in *The Bridge*: to say that engineers not only build engineering systems but also accomplish a lot that affects the culture of the nation and the world and you're a wonderful example of that.



Kealoha. Photo credit: Michael KSC Wong.

KEALOHA: Oh man, thank you so much.

RML: Let me ask, as we do at the end of each of our conversations, is there any message you'd like to pass on to the readers? In addition to the NAE members, *The Bridge* is distributed to members of Congress and their staff, as well as engineering deans of all the research universities. Is there anything you would like to convey to them?

KEALOHA: Sure. I'd like to think that we're all going to be alive for a long time, which means that we have plenty of time to become proficient in a number of extremely different disciplines if we so choose. For you scientists and engineers out there, I urge you to dabble in an art form or to get involved with politics (heck, run for office if you are inspired)! For you politicians out there, I urge you to dabble in a field of science and to truly understand the scientific method (including the difference between a hypothesis and a theory, because they are really, really different)! Not only will your lives be better off by doing so, but *our* collective world will be better off because the generations after us will live through the consequences of our decisions. And the more rounded we are in our thinking, the better those decisions will be.

RML: That's a wonderful message. And your comment about getting involved in politics echoes some of my own thoughts.

CHF: Would you be willing to share with us one of your poems for publication along with this interview?

KEALOHA: Oh yes, that would be awesome.

RML: Thank you once again. This has been an extraordinary conversation and I really appreciate it.

KEALOHA: Right on, thank you guys so much for your time as well. To have this conversation with you is an honor for me.

RML: Great. We appreciate that.

CHF: Yes, thank you.

KEALOHA: All right, take care, you guys.

Zoom Out

tonight . . . i want you to think about your life

i want you to think about what you stand for and realize that all the suffering you've ever experienced means nothing in the long term

for every year you live, the universe will be around for trillions

and for every friend you've made, there are billions yet to be born that you will never meet

in the grand scheme of things, we are nobody

and yet at the same time, *we are everything*

we are X and Y chromosomes

we are G, C, A, and T genomes

we are complex carbohydrates, simple proteins, soft tissue, hard-wired neurons . . .

we are strong bonds linked in nervous systems

and while this earth's surface is covered with 65% saltwater,

we are walking bags made of 65% salt water

merely mimicking the environment that we evolved from

and when we are done, this flesh we call our own returns home to the sea when we dissipate . . .

evaporate into water vapor

and these bones . . .

these bones will be broken down by the roots of the tallest trees

while this earth, hurling through space, will freeze and boil as it has for eons as it orbits the sun

which in five billion years will transform into a red giant and scorch all life as we know it,

its last blast before it fizzles into a whimper remembered by nobody,

or maybe charted by aliens as they peer through telescopes

logging our sun as a piece of data that came and went

and these aliens, whoever they may or may not be

i want them to think about their lives

i want you to think about your life as you study me through your primitive telescopes

and i want everybody, the aliens, you, and me, to realize that even when our hearts break,

or when work sucks or when rent's due or when someone somewhere says something stupid about you

even in the face of homicide, genocide, and suicide

in the face of racism, sexism, classism, and insert-really-bad-word-here-ism

no matter how hard life may get for you or for other people,

zoom out

zoom out and realize that all the evil in this world is transient . . .

heck all the good in this world is transient . . .

you, me, all of us . . . are transient . . .

you will not be you in the grand scheme of things, which makes all your suffering trivial
which makes your ecstasy the only thing worth remembering as part of the universe
expressing itself in one giant orgasm known as the big bang
we are its aftermath sigh
its alibi for not having a reason
you are the universe learning about itself
you are the universe asking itself why it's here
you will soon be the universe *not* learning or asking anything
you are everything and nothing at the same time
and no matter how hard it is to admit, no matter how afraid we get and how much we want to deny the truth, the
truth is . . . well the truth is we're gonna die
maybe not tonight, tomorrow, or next year
but sooner or later we're all gonna die

but the truth is hard to swallow,
and so we do everything we can to avoid the big picture because the big picture is paralyzing . . .
and so we focus our eyes on the day to day dramas of our lives . . .

but not tonight
tonight i want you to think about your life right here
not here, whatever county/state/country you happen to be in right now
but here . . . this world . . . planet Earth
here . . . this galaxy . . . this universe
we are not cavemen anymore
there are no saber tooth tigers lurking in the shadows
yet most of us cling to our fears like the animals we evolved from
what are we so afraid of?
we've been etching the same patterns in the same predictable places for years
why do we live the way that they tell us to?
and who the heck are they, anyway?
it's about time we start doing what's in our hearts because that's all we've really got
i want you to think about all the things you wish you could do
and tonight, i want you to do one of them
and tomorrow, another
our lives are temporary art pieces . . .
we are works in progress . . .
so i say paint your butt off . . .
use florescent yellows and reds in the places where there aren't any color
dance for the moment
sculpt your life out of soil and make the universe smile
be the expressive process that is humanity

tonight, i want you to think about your life
and tomorrow, i want you to live it

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