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Our Theories of Race Will Not Save Us: Towards Localized Storyings of Race, Colonialisms, and Relationships

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Abstract

In this essay, I argue that theorizations of race in writing center scholarship tend to draw on western ontologies, leading to the erasures of complex relationships between peoples of color. In response, I suggest that writing center practitioners of color move towards grounded understandings of race and coloniality that are situated in community, local context, and storying practices.

KIAWE

Kiawe trees grow abundantly along the arid shorelines of Kona. *Prosopis pallida*, or kiawe by its Hawaiian name, is a species of mesquite that was introduced to Hawai‘i shortly after the arrival of the missionaries in 1820 as a replacement for the lowland forest that was quickly being devastated by the sandalwood trade and the introduction of European livestock. A fast-growing and hearty tree, kiawe rapidly spread throughout the islands. Unlike many invasive species, kiawe has a bounty of uses: its dense, hard trunks can be used for charcoal or firewood; the yellow bean pods are edible and offer feed for animals; and kiawe forests prevent soil erosion in areas that have lost their indigenous flora.

When I was a boy, I remember helping my dad cut kiawe in preparation for making imu¹. We would find trees that were dead and dry, saw them up, and carefully load them into the back of his faded blue Mazda pickup. The kiawe logs would be arranged pyramid-style in the imu pit, and over the logs we stacked smooth volcanic river stones. We would light the imu fire at 3:00 a.m., and wait for dawn as the rocks began to glow red-hot. In some ways, these kiawe fires were a callback to the first generation of my family in Hawai‘i, to my great-grandfather who came shortly after the American annexation of Hawai‘i and sold kiawe charcoal to sustain his family.

But the thorns are a pain. Long, sharp, and slightly toxic, kiawe branches are covered in them, and they hide among the dried foliage at your feet, waiting to be stepped on. As gingerly and carefully as you might try to walk, at some point you’ll misstep and get stabbed. When that happens, it’s usually easy enough to pull the thorn out of your slipper. However, what often occurs is that you step on a thorn without realizing it and the tip of the thorn sits

just below the surface of your insole. Every now and then, you'll put your foot down just right and—AUĒ! And because the base of the thorn gets broken off, it's not easy to find and pull out either. I've walked for weeks with an unfound thorn stuck in the bottom of a slipper, not causing me enough pain to throw the pair away, but uncomfortably jabbing into my foot every few days.

When I came to the continental US to learn how to direct a writing center, the academic discussion of race pricked me like a kiawe thorn hidden in my slipper. It pricked me in my first month in my PhD program when a well-meaning (white) graduate student warned me about the struggle of dealing with racists in Indiana as a person of color, and offered to help me find resources. It pricked me as I sat in the middle of a convention hall in the Chicago Sheraton and listened to a room full of white writing center administrators applaud Neisha-Anne Green's address as she urged them to "give up some of the privilege you hold so dearly so that I can have some" (29).

It pricked me a year and a half later in Asao Inoue's address at the 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication. A confession: though I had met Asao years earlier, when he interviewed for a position at my alma mater, I didn't actually attend his talk. The first few days of the conference, I was stuck feverishly working to reconfigure my panel after two members cancelled at the last minute. It wasn't till a month later, as I carefully read over the transcript of Inoue's talk, that I felt sharp discomfort. In the opening of his speech, Asao addresses scholars of color in the room, applauding them for their struggle against white supremacy. I'll return to that introduction in a minute, but what burned me with anger, what

hobbled me with its poisonous thorn, was the direction Asao went next. Turning to the white scholars in the room, he asked “When I addressed only my colleagues of color just a minute ago, how did you feel? How did it make you feel in your skin to be excluded? How did it feel to be talked about and not talked to, to be the object of the discussion and not the subject? How does it feel to be the problem?” (Inoue 356). Inoue went on for the next thirty-two minutes of his forty-six minute talk to call out the white folks in the room for being complicit in white supremacy and white language supremacy. *Thirty-two minutes* for white folks. We got just twelve.

Do you see the irony? Do you see the thorn beginning to show its pointed tip? Inoue addresses the scholars of color in the room to make a point to the white folks. We were merely a rhetorical weapon, wielded without consent, against the monstrous superstructure of whiteness, and against a roomful of white scholars.

There is an underlying assumption, both in the opening of Inoue’s speech and in its two-part structure addressing two audiences. In the short section where he talks to folks of color, Inoue states:

You live it, but sometimes we have to remind ourselves of the magnitude of shit —that we are not oppressed alone. We need to commiserate together here in this place because often we may be alone at our home institutions. We need to lament together. Of course, I commiserate with you today in the presence of White people, so there are other reasons I remind us of the steel cage of racism. We should lament together. It builds coalitions among

the variously oppressed, such as our LGBTQIA colleagues, many of whom are White. (Inoue 354).

Underlying Inoue's presentation of struggle is an assumption of *power* as the currency that determines our relationship to one another, with oppression and resistance being the two sides of that coin. Hetero cis white people are on one side as the representatives of systemic racism, unintentionally or not. On the other side are people of color and LGBTQIA+ folks, joined together by the crushing weight of oppression. This assumption of power struggle as primary leads to an overdetermined and outdated binary, one that cannot be solved by using intersectional understandings of positionality and identity to deconstruct the simplistic division of people into categories of "the problem" or "the variously oppressed." By placing power at the center of how we understand our work towards justice and decolonization, we force our lives into a western ontological framework that is ultimately, and ironically, colonial.

I am not suggesting that critiques focusing on power are wrong, nor am I saying that using critical theory to uncover the white underbelly of oppression should be discarded. However, I am suggesting that to ground our ontology in a struggle for power is to situate ourselves within knowledge systems that can occlude other ways of knowing and being together. In her book *Waves of Knowing: A Seascape Epistemology*, Kanaka Maoli (Hawaiian) scholar and philosopher Karin Amimoto Ingersoll states:

[The] West is not the axis of negotiation that moves my articulations and reactions, because in a multisited world, our

intelligibility is an interconnected matrix. Instead, my aim is to pull indigenous peoples away from the binary oppositions between the “colonizer” and the “colonized,” to minimize the “otherness” from both sides, and to decenter the conversation towards independent and alternative ways of knowing and producing knowledge that allows for empowerment and self-determination within a modern and multisited world. (Ingersole 3)

As writing center practitioners of color, we must ask whether the map which has been set before us, the master’s tools that have been placed in our hands, is conducive to moving towards relations that are truly decolonized. While our theories of race are useful, they often center whiteness and a white response to issues of race. We can no longer tacitly bow before the primacy of western epistemologies and ontologies.

The argument that I’m making in this paper is simple: the focus of critical theory on the complex ways that power is used to oppress certain groups of people, the setting of oppositions and resistances as the foundational framework through which we see our work, is not descriptive of the actual ways that people live in community. Our theories of race attempted situate people of color as natural allies—or more accurately, allies of necessity—due to how white supremacy bears down on us all. I believe that it is important to interrogate not only how are we positioned *against* systemic racism, but also how we are in relationship with one another. As writing center practitioners of color, we must consider our relationships and responsibilities to other people of color within the specific geographic and cultural places we find ourselves. To put it another way, we

must ask *what are the connections, threads, and ties that bind us?*

To move towards this kind of knowing, I draw on settler colonial theory's critique of the erasure of Indigenous presence in conjunction with storying to offer a deeper understanding of the relationships of people to one another on colonized land. Through a multidimensional mapping of story centered around my history in Hawai'i, I offer an example of how writing center practitioners of color can begin to chart our relationships to other people of color within the histories, struggles, and relationships that grow from a place.

MOVING RACE TO THE CENTER

There has never been a livelier discussion of race in the writing center, at least in terms of volume and diversity of publications. Over the last ten years since Greenfield's and Rowan's landmark collection, a slew of publications addressing race in the writing center has begun to shift the conversations around diversity. Although race has been woven into the fabric of writing centers since the influx of open-admissions students brought about their 1970s reincarnation, issues of race were often primarily linked to language in earlier scholarship (Greenfield and Rowan 6). Recent moves in the field, however, have centered the need for writing centers to take an explicitly anti-racist orientation. In surveying the increasingly vibrant body of scholarship on race in the writing center, several trends emerge: an increasing awareness of the diversity of experience of people of color, a confrontation of academic narratives of neutrality, an articulation of the writing center as an explicitly anti-racist space, and the sharing of pedagogical strategies to dismantle racism in the center.

This shift is perhaps not surprising for two reasons: Although writing center administration remains predominantly white and female (Valles et al.), a growing cohort of scholars of color (such as Neisha-Anne Green, Talisha Haltiwanger-Morrison, Wonderful Faison, Jasmine Tang, Kendra L Mitchell, Rasha Diab, and Romeo García, to name a few) have shouldered their way into the conversation on race. When folks of color write about race, we're not talking about an abstracted concept that is siloed in our 9 to 5 in a writing center; we're writing about our lives. Or, Talia Nanton, says "when you're a person of color, you're a person of color all the time" (Haltiwanger-Morrison and Nanton). Thus, folks of color writing about race in the center has led to a more urgent tone in the scholarship. The other obvious reason is our cultural context. The last five years have seen a parade of unavoidable images: resurging white supremacy, police murders of unarmed Black men and women, and the detention of immigrant children. Within this context, the catalytic energy of activism has created a kairotic awareness that the ugliness of racism is embedded in the fabric of American life.

Two kinds of work in particular have begun to shift the image of the center from a grainy black and white picture of interchangeable students of color towards a fuller, technicolored representation of racial experiences of writing and working in the center. First, personal literacy narratives, such as Aja Martinez' "Alejandra Writes a Book," Cedric Burrows' "Writing While Black," or Neisha-Anne Green's "The Re-Education of Neisha-Anne S Green" offer intimate visions of the challenges that writers of color face within the academy. These narratives are significant because the overwhelmingly white history of the academy has meant that narratives of people of color writing and working in the field have been

written largely from white perspectives. For example, one of the most cited early works on race in the field is Annie DiPardo's 1992 essay "Whispers of Comings and Goings': Lessons from Fannie," a case study of the relationship between two women in the writing center: a Black, middle-class tutor and a first-generation Diné student. Although this piece portrays the interactions between two women of color, a white perspective is the centered, authoritative voice. Throughout the essay DiPardo hovers in the background as the "objective" narrator, commenting on the problems and imbalances of the tutorial interaction. It is painfully obvious in pieces like this one that people of color are the subject of examination, and are neither writer nor audience. Thus, when Niesha-Anne Green addressed a room full of IWCA participants and stated, "I have never had a job where I wasn't made aware of my Blackness. I have never had a higher ed job where I wasn't made aware of my lack of my whiteness. I have never had a job in writing center administration where I wasn't the first Black woman" ("Moving Beyond Alright," 20-21), it is significant because Green represents a historic "other" speaking her truth to power. Writing or speaking from the margins always carries within it an implicit attempt to dethrone the center. When members of the writing center community write about writing and draw on their own experiences, histories, and languages, we begin to move away from composition's historic single narrative of race.

The other parallel shift has been towards showing visions of writing centers in institutions that serve significant numbers of students of color, a counter portrait to the image of mainstream writing centers located in predominately white institutions. Karen Keaton Jackson and Mick Howard neatly summarize the problem of institutional

whitewashing in their editor's introduction to the 2019 special issue of *Praxis*: "Why are the voices who teach and tutor hundreds, even thousands, of students of color each year not engaged in and, quite frankly, leading these conversations?" (51). Some of the failures of writing center theory to adequately address the complexities of racism beyond a Black/white binary are a byproduct of institutional privilege in the centers represented in scholarship and the wicked architecture that twists resistance to uphold status quo. Despite our assumed marginalization, many writing centers exist near the center of the hierarchy of higher education. As a result, those centers operate in spaces that have historically been pervaded by whiteness. Additionally, resistance to whiteness in these institutions often is made toothless and reincorporated into university structures to mask the pernicious undercurrent of racism. For both of these reasons, the vision from many mainstream centers is shaded in ways that obscure non-white perspectives. Thus, the contributions of scholars such as Kendra Mitchell, Eric C. Camarillo, and Wonderful Faison has been to provide a counter-perspective from MSIs, from centers that primarily serve students of color and are staffed by students of color. I highlight both the personal and institutional portrayals of writing center work by practitioners of color because they are doing essential work in moving the field away from totalizing portrayals of people of color. By telling narratives from diverse positionalities, they make visible the ways our pedagogy can be colonizing and offer new possibilities for revolutionary praxis. Through story, writing center practitioners of color have been resisting whiteness and moving writing centers towards social justice.

These narratives that many scholars of color in the writing center have been telling draw heavily from critical race theory's concept of "counterstory." Critical race theory (CRT) was birthed in the 1980s out of the work of a handful of legal scholars who wanted a theory that addressed the central role of race in creating an unjust legal system and society. Angela Harris, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, and Derrick Bell were among the early founders of the movement, and saw the aims of CRT being to "develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that work toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination" (Matsuda 1331). In the years since its inception, CRT has been adapted by a number of scholars outside the field of law, including political theorists and scholars of education. Although fractionalized into subfields across the disciplines, scholars of CRT tend to hold in common a few principal assumptions: the social construction of race, the normality rather than aberration of structural racism, the benefit of structural racism to the dominant group, and the unique positionality that enables people of color to disrupt hegemonic narratives (Delgado and Stefancic 8-11). It is from this last item that the counterstory emerges. Counterstories are a CRT tactic, blurring method and methodology, that maps knowledge from the margins in order to understand the ways the functioning of racism in society. Counterstory can be defined as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)" (Solórzano and Yosso 32). While the end of counternarratives is often to make visible oppression, it also creates opportunities for transformational resistance: resistance moves towards social justice (Martinez *Counterstory* 28).

Asao Inoue, in his reflective piece “Narratives that Determine Writers and Social Justice Writing Center Work” provides a clear articulation of the central issue that social justice work, including CRT, in the center is attempting to address: “It’s an accounting of the white supremacist system that causes all these problems, whether they are located in gendered, disability, racialized, national, or linguistic differences. Why? Because white supremacy determines the entire system—is the system—and structures the limits and pressures of all writing center work, whether it is with or by graduates or undergraduates, faculty or staff” (96). For Inoue, it is the system of white supremacy, acting through what he calls “white racial habitus” that determines the network of assessment that writing centers find themselves part of. Bourdieu defines habitus as “systems of durable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu 64). Habitus, then, is as a set of embodied dispositions and tastes that are shaped by and through lived experience rooted in culture, and operate below the level of consciousness. Inoue argues that within the system of higher education, it is a *white* habitus that becomes embodied in our ecologies of assessment, in the ways that language is or is not valued, and in the ways we subtly push our students to write white. As Inoue sees it, the work of social justice in the writing center is to make visible that habitus.

Although I believe work must be done to unmake and unmask white racial habitus, when that work is our primary telos, it means that despite a mosaic fracturing of perspective through counterstories, the picture being constructed has a preset design that individual pieces fit into. That design is a description of the system of white supremacy. As a result, when I try to bring these conversations into the center with

me, they sit around the shoulders like a suit that is too tight, fixing the head forward, like an unneeded neck brace. While my understanding of storying draws from CRT's counterstorying, I do not fully align myself with critical race theory. Because counterstory emerged with the goal of activism and reshaping the legal system, it is oriented towards working within structure. The orientation towards a structure, specifically a western legal structure, means that the often-responsive telos of counterstories' knowledge production results in a mirroring of western epistemologies. To set myself constantly against white supremacy is to set white supremacy constantly before me. It is to live with the monstrous horror of racism as the primary lens through which I understand my relations to the people around me. It is to let a western ontology delimit the boundaries of my vision of liberation. To put it simply, a single-minded focus on that which we wish to dethrone results in us becoming further entangled in it. What I believe is necessary is a "situatedness" in our stories: for our stories to engage with the unique histories of place that spring from relationships with other people of color.

REIMAGING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH STORY

Being from Hawai'i in Indiana seems to have a kind of magic power. Almost everyone I've met on the continental US has the idea that Hawai'i is a tropical paradise with gorgeous vistas, sultry weather, and endless Mai Tais on the beach. When I respond to the question of "Where are you from?" with "Hawai'i," I become enmeshed within a fantasy of the Islands, the fabricated vision of a place that everyone "wants to visit someday. . ." The visual signifiers of my body as a person of color are joined with "being from Hawai'i," and my identity is collapsed into a mythic-

colonial construct. I've had to explain too many times to count I'm not Hawaiian just because I'm from Hawai'i, that we use US dollars, and that just because it's beautiful doesn't mean it's paradise. While these exchanges are often light and humorous ("Oh, you didn't know that we paddle between the islands on canoes?"), it's hard to avoid the messy strands of my history disappearing into crayon simplicity as the person in front of me mentally situates me somewhere on a beach in paradise.

There is a similar process of condensing and smoothing that occurs when I get hailed as a person of color. Until I moved to the Midwest, I didn't consider myself a person of color. I knew the term academically, but back in Hawai'i, it didn't seem to signify me or my family. I wasn't a person of color; I was Chinese, Okinawan, German, English, and Scottish. It was my relationships with people, where my family lived, and who I knew that formed the framework for identification. When I moved into academia on the continent, I found that suddenly I was a "POC" (this was before BIPOC gained popularity). The assumptions that people made about me—the folks who welcomed me into my program, not those who were ostensibly racists—were either tied to me being a person of color or to their notions of Hawai'i. Neither of those categories fit.

I found I being woven into a fabric with an unfamiliar design, one where parts of my identity were being read as threads within histories and patterns I had no knowledge of or connections to. It was kind of *jamais vu* I felt perceiving myself reflected back through the eyes of others; and nowhere did I feel this sensation more than in the academy. The tendency of us academics to accumulate knowledge that is disembodied from the

communities that knowledge originated from meant that most of the people I encountered in my daily life in my department “knew” the history of Hawai‘i and its colonial occupation. At the same time, how they engaged with me normal interactions made me feel as if they were drawing more from a tacit knowledge that understood the strands that bound me to culture, race, and coloniality in simplistic and inaccurate ways.

To pull at one thread, consider how I speak: I speak something close to “unaccented” English, close enough that most folks on the continental U.S. can’t pin me down by my tongue. Although the English I speak at home includes Hawaiian, Japanese, and Filipino words, I didn’t grow up speaking with an inflection too different than someone from northern California. And on the continent, my non-white words disappear leaving only a trace of difference. This lack of discernible accent, along with being from Hawai‘i, almost always get me a positive response. Even the cheerful tow truck operator who asked me “What kind of Asian are you?” and went on to tell me about how his family didn’t want him “raising half-breed children,” responded to me being from Hawai‘i with, “Well, that’s all right then. . . It’s the Chinese and Vietnamese *women* who are crazy. . .” My language lets me pass without a second thought. But my language has a history, one that is tied to two colonialism and the relationships between settlers of color to Indigenous language.

When I was a child, I loved climbing hau trees. Hau, with their yellow hibiscus-like flowers and dark green leaves, grow up and spread out, creating interconnected canopies. When I climbed them, I would have a tree where I started, but would be able to climb through the whole network without touching the ground. Stories are like that. They are

intangible, thickly growing networks where any point, any one story, is connected by myriad branches to multiple trunks. To draw out the connections in story allows us to grow our knowing from the ground and see that who we are and where we stand is determined as part of an ever-expanding grove.

I offer you two stories—one about language and power, the other about relationship. They may not technically be writing center stories, but they are the stories that have carried me into the writing center.

* * *

My first ancestor to come to Hawai'i was my great grandfather Tokushin Nakamoto, who left Ryukyu (Okinawa) in 1908 at the age of 26. Tokushin was the son of a farmer, though his grandfather and other ancestors had been teachers of Chinese. What I had heard growing up was a typical American bootstrap story of my great grandfather's immigration to Hawai'i; that he left poverty in his home country to make a fresh start in a land of opportunity. The truth is more complicated. In 1872, Japan annexed the Ryukyu Kingdom, and in 1879 the prefecture of Okinawa was created. Uchinanchu (Okinawans) are genetically and culturally different from Japanese; thus, as part of its imperialist nation-building, the Meiji administration attempted to suppress Ryukyuan culture and language, viewing the Uchinanchu as backwards, needing to be assimilated into mainstream Japanese culture. When Japan began colonization, it outlawed education in Uchināguchi (Okinawan language) and forced traditional practices to stop. Thus, at the time my great grandfather immigrated from Okinawa, the islands were facing famine due to mismanagement and neglect by the colonial Japanese government.

Tokushin could not have known that he were fleeing one colonialism to participate in another.

The colonization of Hawai'i and loss of sovereignty is a long and complicated story, but I'll offer an abridged summary: Protestant Missionaries arrived in 1820 at a time of turmoil in Hawaiian society, leaving an opportunity for Christianity to spread rapidly through the islands. With the growth of Christianity, foreigners began to quickly gain power alongside a precipitous decline in the Hawaiian population due to the introduction of European diseases. The increasingly wealthy white oligarchy used their newly acquired land for plantations, which required the importation of labor from China, Japan, Portugal, the Philippines, and Okinawa. On January 17, 1893, a coalition of white American businessmen and politicians, backed by a company of U.S. marines, orchestrated the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom and formed the Provisional Government. One of the goals of the Provisional Government was to make Hawai'i more appealing as a US possession through the suppression of the Hawaiian culture. A few years after the overthrow, a mandate by the new Republic of Hawaii formally instituted English as the sole language of instruction and banned the use of 'Ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian language) in schools (Wilson and Kamanā 154). The erasure of Hawaiian language facilitated through systems of education furthered the colonial aims of the United States by severing the Hawaiian people from their connection to language, and through language to cultural history. This state orchestrated linguicide worked to disguise the Indigenous history of Hawai'i, legitimizing the equal-claim rhetoric put forth by the white oligarchy which asserted that Hawaiians are merely another ethnic group in Hawai'i with no special claim to self-governance or sovereignty (Trask 47).

In response to the loss of their language, Hawaiians turned to Hawaiian Creole English, more commonly known as “Pidgin,” to maintain discursive autonomy. Pidgin, which borrows English, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and Hawaiian words, had developed in the late 1800s as a language of necessity among the immigrant plantation workers who needed a way to communicate with one another. In her essay “Pidgin as Rhetorical Sovereignty: Articulating Indigenous and Minority Rhetorical Practices with the Language Politics of Place,” Georganne Nordstrom argues that in the years following the ban of Hawaiian as a language of instruction in the public schools, Hawaiians chose to speak Pidgin, which retained some Hawaiian words and grammar, as a way of maintaining an Indigenous identity in the context of colonization (335). This assertion of rhetorical sovereignty was not left unchallenged, and the use of Pidgin denigrated by colonial institutions, beginning in the territorial era of Hawai‘i.

My grandmother grew up in these territorial years. She was born in Kohala on Hawai‘i island, but moved with her family to Oahu during the war years. The stories that she told me as a child are now fragments that piece together a partial image: my grandmother working in the sweet potato patch with her siblings, walking after dark among the sugar cane, and sewing clothes out of the cloth rice-sacks because fabric was too expensive. Woven into the background of these stories are the relations between members of different immigrant communities and the Hawaiian people. Although the Uchinanchu community was considered “Japanese” by the wartime American military and forbidden from living near the coast, costing my great-grandfather his business, relationships between Japanese and Uchinanchu peoples were sometimes tense. In an interview conducted in the early 1980s,

my great-grandfather alludes the pressures on Uchinanchu people to assimilate to Japanese norms in Hawai'i:

After I ate, I usually relaxed one or two hours at home playing the *shamisen*. There was no one that could teach, so we learned by just listening as somebody else played. They played mostly mainland Japanese songs from bars and those kinds of places. They didn't play Okinawan songs. Okinawan people only sang Okinawan songs at home, hiding from others. (394)

Even on a sugar plantation on the northmost part of Hawai'i island, the politics of Japanese colonialism, which positioned Uchinanchu culture and language as inferior, mapped the ways that Uchinanchu people, including my great-grandfather, interacted with members of the Japanese community.

An undercurrent in some of my grandma's stories about the growing up in rural Hawai'i is a sense of embarrassment at "being country" or not speaking "proper" Japanese and English. My grandmother and her family spoke Uchināguchi, which meant that they were marked as obviously not from mainland Japan if they interacted with Japanese immigrants. Uchināguchi and Japanese are not mutually intelligible, and even though my grandmother and her family had learned to understand Japanese, their accents gave them away as being from Okinawa, which carried the stigma of being unrefined or uneducated. My grandma worked exceptionally hard in school to learn "proper English" and to avoid "broken English." In high school, this work paid off and she was allowed to enter McKinley High School, an English Standard School.

In the 1920s, English Standard Schools were created as a way of separating (largely) white children from Local and Hawaiian children who spoke Pidgin (Hughes 71). These schools required prospective students to prove proficiency in Edited American English, with the intent of filtering out non-white, Pidgin speaking students who might prove a “bad” influence. My grandma’s education in the English standard schools, along with an overall excellent performance, meant that she was given greater opportunities to advance her education. Through hard work in this school system, she gradually was able to acquire language that passed for something closer to “Standard” English. This acquisition of the language of power, however, meant that my father and his siblings did not grow up speaking hearing or speaking much Pidgin. Interlocking colonialisms in Okinawa and Hawai’i, alongside the language politics in both spaces, shaped how my family’s language developed and gave me a tongue that sounds whiter than I look.

* * *

My tongue first betrayed me around the time I was ten. I’m pretty sure it was at a first-year baby party for one of my parent’s friends. A salty breeze drifted up from the nearby harbor, cooling the humid night. Under the open pavilions, people drifted from table to table with plates stacked high with food. I stuck close to my mom, unsure of whether to join the other kids who were running around with Matchbox cars between the legs of the wooden picnic benches.

I was just old enough to recognize that this party was a space where I didn’t quite fit. The kids were all speaking Pidgin, and my own tongue didn’t form words or sentences in the same way. Big Island

Pidgin has a different cadence, flow, and vocabulary than Oahu Pidgin, which I had heard from my friends. And I didn't really even speak that much Pidgin. Instead of showing myself as an interloper, I picked up a paper plate and began loading it up with the most local foods still left in the aluminum trays: I took both 'ahi and marlin poke, scooped up yellow 'opihi (even though I didn't like 'opihi), grabbed a small cup of poi, and shoveled a large helping of the black 'a'ama crab legs onto my plate.

I had seen 'a'ama before, alive, running nimbly along jagged lava plates near the ocean, and had used their dried red carapaces to tease my sisters. But I had never eaten 'a'ama. However, surveying the food before me, 'a'ama seemed the most alien and thus the most likely signifier of belonging in this new community. To my ten-year old anxieties, partaking in the same food as everyone else seemed like the best bet to invisibly slip into place. I sat down and started eating; but a moment after I squeezed the tiny white portion of meat from the first crab leg and swallowed, I knew something was wrong. My tongue went numb and tingly and my throat started to contract. My parents had wondered off, but Uncle Billy came over to ask how we were doing and if the food was good. I enthusiastically nodded, despite my face feeling like it was being pricked all over. I kept eating and didn't leave my table because I didn't trust my tongue.

Uncle Billy² was my dad's reception's husband, a big Hawaiian man from Kohala, deeply tanned from years of working out under the sun. I remember him taking off his watch, and the spot under his watch being the only part of him that was not a deep brown. "Dat's my haole part" he joked. Uncle Billy's day job was building rock walls, and he had a company with several of his sons. The rock walls

that he made were intricately constructed, and I remember him pointing out to me a corner of a wall that he had built and talking about how much time he spent finding rocks that fit perfectly into one another. Although some builders would shape the rocks or chip away the edge of a plate, Uncle Billy preferred to find natural stones and interlock them using their original shapes. This was how the ancient Hawaiians did it, he told me, building heiau (temples) like Pu‘ukoholā, with the whole structure being held together only through gravity and interlocked stones.

Sometimes when we were hunting together on the jagged slopes of Mauna Kea, walking up and down miles of ridges until my legs ached, he would point out a beautiful unbroken lava plate, weighing perhaps several hundred pounds, and ask me, “Boy! You like grab that one for me?” Of course he was joking, and we would trek on, shotguns in hand. Uncle Billy always ended up bagging plenty chukkars and quail, game birds introduced by white settlers who wanted hunting on the islands. I always ended up shooting rocks, which had less meat. In the lulls between action, when we were just hiking, Uncle Billy told me about growing up on Big Island back in the day, and needing to hunt to provide for his family. “What they no understand is that if da government outlaw huntin’, some people not goin’ eat.” With Uncle Billy, I was still self-conscious about sounding too haole. But my tongue was loosening.

Ironically, when I found my voice, it was through my hands and not my mouth. When I was sixteen, I picked up kī hō‘alu, a Hawaiian style of guitar, under the instruction of Keoki Kahumoku, a teacher, farmer, pig hunter, and musician from a long line of Hawaiian musicians. He encouraged me and my siblings to come to Pāhala, a town several hours

drive on the other side of the island, for a workshop that he was running for a week with a number of other local musicians. A few months later, we pulled up in front of a green two-story plantation house where the workshop was being held. The participants were a mixed bunch: haole retirees who were paying significant amounts of money to come, and kids from the community who were there on scholarship. In recent years, I've talked to some of the other workshop students around my age, and there is a shared sense that the weeks we spent in the old Pāhala plantation house held a kind of communal magic that linked us together. For one week each year, we all lived and breathed music; together we learned 'Ōlelo Hawai'i, danced hula, made imu, learned 'oli (chants), and played music until dawn began to lighten the sky.

Alongside musical instruction, one of the main lessons that my kumu taught me was my kuleana as a haumana (student) learning Hawaiian music. The concept of kuleana can be defined as a right, privilege, or responsibility and carries the implication of reciprocal system of relationships. Kanaka Maoli scholar Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua refers to kuleana as "intertwining authority and responsibility," pointing to how one's authority is tied to responsibility and positionality (47). Learning slack key guitar was a privilege I was invited into by my my kumu. Historically, kī hō'alu was consider secret knowledge and taught only within families; however, this secrecy led to the art form almost becoming extinct in the 1970s. When I was taught kī hō'alu, I was one of the few young people on the island learning slack key. My teachers emphasized to me that I now had a kuleana to teach and pass on the knowledge to the next generation of Hawaiian musicians. Learning kī hō'alu gave me a voice, one that fit into the joyful mess of 'ukulele, steel guitars,

and people singing “E Hawai’i e ku’u one hanau e,
ku’u home kulaiwi nei. . .”

* * *

These are two kinds of stories, with different foci. Both the first story’s wider mapping of power and language in my family and the second story’s understanding of self-in-community are valuable. When I worked with Kanaka Maoli students dealing with the trauma of generational linguistic colonialism, the mapping of my family’s history provided me with important background and understanding of my own positionality. In her essay “Settlers of Color and ‘Immigrant’ Hegemony: ‘Locals’ in Hawai’i,” Haunani-Kay Trask critiques the rhetoric of “Local,” which positions Asian settlers as equal possessors of Hawai’i alongside the Hawaiian people, erasing the genealogical connections between Kānaka ‘Ōiwi and land. Trask argues that Asian settlers benefited from the dispossession of the Hawaiian people by American colonialism, and need to recognize their complicity in the continued effects of colonialism. Indeed, my own family is complicit in this history. The event that firmly cemented Hawai’i as American territory was the bombing of Pu’uloa, or Pearl Harbor. Pearl Harbor and WWII did two things in Hawai’i: it established the islands firmly as part of the United States, and positioned Japanese (and Okinawans) who fought as good Americans. My great uncles all served in the U.S. military, and most of them reaped the economic rewards of the general upward trend of Okinawans in the U.S. With the recognition of my family’s complicity in the continued dispossession of Kanaka Maoli from their land and language, I recognize my kuleana as a tutor to work towards the decolonization of language and of land.

Some of the Kanaka Maoli students that I worked with, including graduate students, had a strong sense of shame over the fact that their language didn't match the expectations for SAE in the academy. I remember working with one student in particular who told me that he didn't want other people knowing that he came to the writing center because he was afraid they'd think "How did that stupid guy get into grad school?" The baggage that students brought into the center with them had within it the weight of over a century of colonial education that devalued Kanaka Maoli languages, whether Hawaiian or Pidgin, and taught that standard, unaccented English was the only correct way to communicate. I can't count the times that I heard students refer to their English as "broken" because they couldn't code-switch completely out of Pidgin. By understanding my family's story and its historical context, I was able to see my positionality within the center and the responsibility to other writers of color in the context of colonialism.

Although understanding my family's role in colonialism in Hawai'i was useful, it was ultimately what I learned in relationship that I carried with me into sessions. When I draw on my knowledge of place to make connections for a writer or used words in 'Ōlelo Hawai'i, I pull on the things that I learned in community. The embodied ways of being with people in a Hawaiian cultural context were not learned in a classroom or from studying. They were learned through being with people who welcomed me in and generously shared knowledge with me. They were learned in hours walking through lava fields waiting for birds to flush. They were learned in the community I became a part of through playing music. To return to Bourdieu, my habitus, my "feel for the game," the unconscious ways I had learned to navigate space and engage with folks, were the

result of years of being with people and becoming part of a community.

PATHS FORWARD: SITUATING AND UNSETTLING OUR KNOWLEDGE

Although there can be the impulse to ignore the ways that our institutions are tied to place and history, a writing center does not exist as an impermeable entity, grappling with issues of race, language, and power in absence of an immediate geographic, cultural, and historic context. The outside is always seeping into the center, and what seeps in is specific to place and the genealogies of relationships between people within that place. When I am in a center in Hawai'i, the history of that place and my family's past, patched into the larger story of Hawai'i, both determines my responsibilities in how I engage with writers as well as maps potentialities for relationships that work towards unsettling the settler colonial state. Although I draw on settler colonial theory to examine my family's history and understand my kuleana, I do not see settler colonial theory as an end point, as it is entangled within western ontologies. What is needed is an orientation towards community beyond the confines of academia that allows for knowledge and pedagogy to form within the writing center as an extension of local networks of relationships. To move beyond the Black/white binary that García critiques in "Unmaking Gringo-Centers," what is necessary is not a shift away from theories of race and colonialism, but rather a grounding of theory in the local, tangled, and earthy relations between people of color in a specific community.

Theory from the top down is a mapping that both charts and determines the thing being mapped. Too often, the conversation around race and the

discourse of allyship centers the efforts of the white subject in participating in the liberation of the non-white other. Even though “allies” may acknowledge the need to give up their own power and privilege, the focus is on “being an ally,” as Green points out. Alternatively, scholars of color deploying critical race theory leads to setting ourselves in opposition to whiteness as a system of oppression. While this does not *seem* problematic, the lens of critical race theory applied to our everyday practices means that we often see and validate our lives within a framework of power struggle.

The vision of the socially just, activist writing center within contemporary scholarship is still largely built within the framework of a western capitalist culture. To try to move the writing center towards a vision of justice that works *smoothly* in a majority of academic context means that the vision of justice and egalitarian community that we can conceive of for our center still exists within the confines of a western ideology. The imposition of a worldview which maps all relationships to a grid of power struggle between oppressor and oppressed, white and other, or colonizer and colonized is itself a colonizing descendent of European thought. To develop centers that are truly just, we must also work to decenter western epistemologies and create definitions of justice which are rooted in local and Indigenous epistemologies. I believe that we can move towards these local definitions through storying our own positionality, receiving stories from others, and being deeply imbedded in communities outside the academic context of writing center work.

I know this direction forward is hard. Academics tend to be nomadic, and settle far from our homes of origin, if we had them to begin with. Because the

academy forces us towards isolation from our communities of origin, it becomes easier to map a capital “T” Theory of race onto what we see in the small sphere of a writing center. That mapping can lead increased activism, change, and diversity; however, it may not consider local context or knowledges. As writing center practitioners, it’s often easier to apply Theory to a local context because we often have not been *in* the local context long enough or deep enough to understand the nuance of place, the relations of people to one another and to the land, and our kuleana in the middle of all of it. In addition, these theoretical mappings are unlikely to result in anything truly decolonial because they are still building a vision of social justice is rooted in a western ontology that does not acknowledge other ways of knowing and being in the world. Although a full decoupling from ideology may not be possible, we can sink ourselves deeply “under the discourses of others” through being in community.

Although I have thought of folks of color in writing centers as my audience for most this piece, I have a simple charge to all writing center practitioners: Unsettle yourself. The conversations I’ve been hearing for years in writing center circles about trying to implement theory, whether critical race theory or decolonial theory, is too often in absence of being in community with people of color. Land acknowledgements, claims to decolonize pedagogy, and calls for social justice work do nothing if we are talking about helping people but are not willing to live with them. So, consider moving out of your middle-class neighborhood, if you live in one, and into a community that is uncomfortably unwhite. Make friendships with your neighbors. Don’t try to save them. Listen to them. Serve them in ways that don’t benefit you academically or otherwise. Be with

people, not just for them. If you do, your view of the center will not remain the same.

NOTES

[1] Imu is a traditional Hawaiian method of cooking that involves steaming food in underground oven.

2 “Uncle” and “Auntie” are honorifics in Hawai‘i used with older people, and do not necessarily denote blood relationship.

3 Haole, a Hawaiian word meaning “foreigner,” but in contemporary usage referring to white people.

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