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## **Remarks: Regional Constructions of Cultural Identity Forum July 6, 1997\***

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**Abstract:** When I began writing poetry, it was not with any audience in mind, nor any poet in mind. Those poems just had a life of their own and, in my present life, I'm beginning to find the meaning in them. They are probably my greatest teachers.

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'Ano'ai me ke Aloha, e na hulu manu like 'ole.

In our mothers' tongue, "Greetings among us, birds of many feathers."

I'd like to say a couple of things first. One, when I began writing poetry, it was not with any audience in mind, nor any poet in mind. Those poems just had a life of their own and, in my present life, I'm beginning to find the meaning in them. They are probably my greatest teachers.

I want to start off by reading a poem and telling a story to show you, as an example, how poems and stories are very necessary tools in regard to community organizing, especially in these times. The poem I'd like to read to you is called "Choosing My Name."

When I was born my mother gave me three names:

Christabelle, Yoshie, and Puanani.

"Christabelle" was my "English" name,

My social security card name,  
My school name,  
The name I gave when teachers asked me  
    For my "real" name; it was a safe name.  
"Yoshie" was my home name,  
My everyday name,  
The name that reminded my father's family  
    that I was Japanese, even though  
    my nose, hips and feet were wide,  
    it was the name that made me acceptable to them  
    who called my Hawaiian mother *kuroi*;  
    it was a saving name.

Puanani is my chosen name,  
My piko name, connecting me to the 'Aina,  
    and to the kai and to the Po'e Kahiko;  
    it is my blessing and my burden,  
    my amulet, my spear.

When I first wrote that poem, the place it first appeared was in one of the special editions that the newspaper puts out and my father saw it. That was the first place that he saw that poem. My father is Japanese. I was named after him. His name is Christopher Yoshiyuki Sonoda and I am Christabelle Yoshie Puanani Sonoda.

My father was immediately called by my aunties and uncles asking him, "Who is she writing about? Who are those people that called her mother *kuroi*?" And, "You know, you need to call her up and tell her *to stop* doing that. It's not right that she talks about family stuff in the newspaper."

My father, much to his credit and a feature, I think, of his own courage that I never recognized growing up, said, "That is the girl's history and she deserves a way to tell that history however *she* wants *to tell* it. It is her reality." And so, with those words, he kept them from ringing me up and disconnecting me forever.

I was thinking about a title for this talk and if I had one it would be something like "Finding Meaning in the Face of Power: The Role of Poetry and Storytelling."

What our communities are undergoing right now is incredible pain. They are being asked to transform themselves without any input. We see golf courses, we see all

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kinds of stores and developments that are cropping up in our community that have no relationship *to* who we are.

There's this really wonderful old woman who I met in Wai'anae Store; she came up to me and said, "Eh, Pua, you know what ... I live Wai'anae all my life and you know, I born hea and I come this store every day and I know everybody. But you know, I come this store now and I know almost nobody and I nevah move!"

That is the reality of what is happening in our communities. If you have the price of lease or rent or mortgage, you can become a neighbor. But just living next door to each other doesn't make you a "neighbor," not in the old sense, like in the days of our grandparents. Part of the reason why it is so hard to be neighbors is that we don't have Time. Families are working themselves to death. They are working one, two, three jobs. Both adults are out there. And there is not time just to sit back and create those neighborhoods that each of us who are fifty years old and older really understand and have experienced.

And so we're thinking about how we can talk about and retrieve our history, not just in terms of celebrations or memorial events or dry essays, but how do we retrieve our history as the people in Appalachia, who are some of my greatest teachers, have done. The people of Appalachia are also trying to recover their history and dignity in the face of tremendous disempowerment and oppression. They are trying to find the meaning of the coal mine experience, for example, just as we are trying to find the meaning in the plantation experience.

Poetry has been essential in people being able to back into their pain, being able to deal with very painful issues in a way that doesn't destroy them. That poem, "Choosing My Name," talks about some very difficult issues of identity, security, values and oppression.

I used to watch those mah jong games, you know, that our aunties and uncles and grandparents played. Sometimes it was *hana-fuda*, but for my Japanese aunties and uncles, it was mostly mah jong that they played. They all gathered at one auntie's house, and at some point they would talk about my mother. And I was a little child just hanging around and they would call her things—like *kuroi*—what they actually meant was "nigger." And they would wonder how Yoshibo could have married that woman. And, as a child they dismissed me, not realizing that I had ears and a heart and a mind and that someday, those memories would become part of my politics.

But as you look at me today and as I look at myself in the mirror, I am Yoshie, I am that Japanese girl that grew up with my *bachan* and *jichan*. I am the girl that went to *ban* dance and went to the temple to bless those little pieces of tissue paper that my grandmother used to paste on me to bless me and to protect me from hurt. I am that person as well.

I am also Christabelle. I am that American girl who grew up pledging allegiance to the flag and singing those American patriotic songs with tremendous loyalty to that country. And then I discovered that my loyalty was misplaced and a whole range of people, not just Hawaiian people, are discovering what actually happened in 1893 with the United States Government. And what do you do when you are faced with a history that you never knew, never understood? History that was not part of yours and that you are learning about as an adult. History that causes tremendous pain.

I want to tell you a story that shows how to deal with these issues. History is—and I think the Japanese have also found this to be so because of the role of Japan in the war—that history is part of reclaiming our health, as a society. If we cannot reclaim our history, live it, own up to it, do something about it, then we continue to be victims of that history.

I have a very good friend who teaches Hawaiian history at Pearl City High School and she is a Japanese woman and every time she comes to that part in Hawaii's history that deals with the Mahele, which is the great cutting up of the Land and the distribution of that land to a variety of interest groups—every time she comes to that part, the Mahele, she sees the kids doing this: they put their heads down on the table, make pepa airplanes, fly' em around the room, talk to each other, absolutely zone out of that discussion.

So, what she found out, after seven years of teaching that course, was that the kids believed, "Eh, my people stupid! If dey wasn't stupid, how come dey no moah da land? Dey shoulda regista for da land, just like da law tole 'em foa do. But no, dey nevah do 'em. Oat's why we no moah land, no moah watah, no moah money, no moah powa."

And, you know, nothing you or that teacher could tell them could talk them out of that reality. They live in the projects; they know what poverty is; they live it. They understand hopelessness. And there's nothing we can say to dissuade them. They

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don't buy the statement, "Hey, you can grow up to be President of the United States. You can be anything you want." That's not their reality.

So, on the first day of school, she had a genius idea; it was a simple idea, as most truly genius ideas are—what she did was she wrote up on the blackboard, you know, in that place that teachers really like, on the far, far upper right corner, she wrote, "Register for your chair in two weeks, or lose it." And then she signed it and then she drew a chalk box around the sign.

Two weeks later, the kids came into the classroom, looked around and said, "Eh, teach. Like whea da chairs?"

She said, "What do you mean, 'Where are the chairs?'"

"Like, what we goin' sit on? Floah?"

"Well," she said, "You read English?"

"Yeah."

"You read the sign that I put up on the blackboard?"

"Yeah."

"Well, why didn't you register for those chairs, like I told you to do?"

"Yeah, but you nevah tole us, 'Eh, pay attention, dis foa real.' Nobody wen evah do dis to us befoa; so, eh, we wen jus' blow 'em off."

"Well, now do you understand what happened to your ancestors?" she asked.

"They were being asked to register to own the land; it was like being asked to own your own mothers. How many of you have the audacity to go down to the Bureau of Conveyances to register to own your mothers? Your ancestors were not just being asked to do something unusual; they were being asked to do something sacrilegious—to own land. They were also being asked to do this at a time of great imperialism in the world and in the Pacific. Back then there were no empowerment workshops to tell the people about their human and political rights. No, nothing like that was going on."

So, those kids began to understand that within the context of the world in which Hawai'i existed, that there were many things that were happening that was not caused by the stupidity of their ancestors. So, they began to pick up their history as a spear and began poking holes in all the paradigms that imprisoned them.

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Whenever I tell that story, to all kinds of people, they begin to understand that we need to reclaim our deep history. In one of the projects that's part of our community called the Cultural Learning Center at Ka'ala, every year we work with about 3,000 kids, ALL kinds of kids, ALL makes and models. And one of the things that we teach there, the most important thing, is that the 'aina, the Land, is color blind. She doesn't know if you are Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiian or haole. She only knows if you love her; she knows if you respect her. And when you treat her as all mothers should be treated—with dignity and respect—then she gives you back that dignity and respect by giving you food, shelter, stability and life.

And so, when we talk to kids and we tell them, "Don't give us that bull that you're not responsible for the Land because you're not Hawaiian; you are responsible. This Land is your Mother, as well as mine. But it goes beyond that, this history is yours to care for, not just mine; the future of Hawai'i is your responsibility as well as mine."

In ending my presentation of how poetry works in the face of power—it becomes an incredible part of how our whole society reorganizes itself around certain values. I want to include a poem that I wrote called, "The Mouse Is Dreaming." The last lines of this poem are actually an old Eastern European saying.

In the dark hole behind the washing machine,  
the house-mouse is dreaming.  
Whiskers, body, tail-twitching and trembling,  
paws scratching the air.  
That mouse, he's a dreamin'  
of great chunks of cheese, and whole loaves of bread;  
of a nest made of the finest pieces of cloth and paper,  
dry, warm and snug.  
Of living out in the open once again, to be sun-warmed  
and star-shined.  
Of walking. Of walking through the territory patrolled by the Cats;  
of cat traps, and cat cages,  
and cats without claws and teeth;  
Of a world without Cats.  
And this mouse, she's a dreamin'  
of acres of lo'i kalo, of nets full of 'ōpelu,  
of rocks choke with 'opihi and limu,  
of forests of koa and 'iliahi and wiliwili;

of empty and crushed buildings which no longer  
scrape the sky;  
Of living in the open once again, to be sun-warmed  
and star-shined;  
Of walking. Of simply walking through the territory  
controlled by the Cats;  
of cat traps, and cat cages,  
and cats without claws and teeth;  
Of a world without Cats.

And the Mice dream dreams  
That would terrify the Cat.

Aloha.



**Puanani Burgess** (Aunty Pua) is a noted cultural expert and was recently awarded a meritorious doctor of letters (D. Litt., indigenous knowledge holder) for her lifetime contributions to indigenous education by the World Indigenous Nations University. Aunty Pua is also recognized as a living treasure of Hawai'i and as a community scholar working with the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Hawai'i in Mānoa. Aunty Pua serves as a mentor to her generation and to subsequent generations, passing on living Hawaiian wisdom, knowledge, practices, and worldviews. Aunty Pua's work as a member of the Hui is having and will have an international impact as she shapes our thinking about how indigenous work in education, social services, and community development is evaluated and assessed. She is revolutionizing our thinking about Hawaiian ways.