

Chapter 3 I. Caught in Between: A View of Positionality and Marginalization from the Middle

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During summer 2022, I took a course called “Positionality in Research,” taught by Dr. Rebecca Rickly at Texas Tech University. I knew the course would be “mission-critical” for me as a doctoral student considering a dissertation that would involve my home community in Hawai‘i. What I didn’t anticipate was that I would be crying all semester—not just a few tears but heaving sobs that became the backdrop to writing my weekly reading responses—because my positionality was changing. While positionality will always be fluid, this chapter serves as a snapshot of where I am situated now and the moves that got me here. It’s a story about facing hard truths, changing perspectives, and embracing the messiness of being in the middle.

Early in the course, I needed to write a positionality statement. In it, I explained that I was born and raised on the island of Kaua‘i and had never traveled outside of Hawai‘i until I was 18 years old and left to pursue a degree in English/Writing. I am not of Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) genealogy, though many people outside of Hawai‘i assume I am and have mistakenly referred to me as “Hawaiian.” I am a fourth-generation settler to Hawai‘i, the first biracial person in my family—half Japanese and half Portuguese—whose ancestors came to Hawai‘i as plantation laborers. I can speak “Pidgin” (Hawai‘i Creole English) but am not fluent in ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian language). I grew up around but have limited knowledge of or experience with Kanaka Maoli cultural practices and traditions.

The initial draft of my positionality statement established my status as an insider-outsider for research relating to Hawai‘i, which I could readily accept. But where exactly was I in the middle? In different situations and contexts, I seemed to be in different places in relation to my home community, ever shifting. I felt fraudulent and not wholly anything. This liminal space, what I thought of as a “murky middle,” was difficult to understand and navigate. I was adrift and grasping, not able to get my bearings. What helped me was writing everything down—and then returning to it.

A Journey Through Positionality Journals

The following selected passages are from my positionality journals during the course. These musings made some of the struggles with my identity and relational

connection to my home community more tangible. While my writing today uses ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i diacritical marks, these entries have been included as originally written.

June 14, 2022

Check yourself before you wreck yourself,
but “don’t make it all about you!”

It’s so hard to be a researcher. We’re always in the middle of this work we’re trying to do—can’t possibly get out of the way of it, needing to articulate where/who we are and why that’s meaningful all the time—and yet, we’re trying so hard not to make it all about ourselves. I have a particular insecurity with a ‘both/and’ existence (e.g., for me: biracial, Hawaii/mainland, English/other languages, industry/academia, arts/sciences, etc.) where I never quite feel 100% belonging at any given moment in any given area. It’s all very fluid—certainly not exclusive to me, but it’s hard to grapple with even when others do have similar experiences.

In this entry, I recalled the resonance of Dr. Cana Itchuaqiyaq’s words, “don’t make it all about you,” from a presentation at our institution a month earlier. I recognized the starting point as always-already striving toward a balance of self and research.

June 29, 2022

Keep calm and keep a “puke ho‘omana‘o” (journal)

It just so happens that I learned the Hawaiian word for ‘journal’ this week. Keeping a journal is not something that comes naturally to me. In fact, aside from course requirements, the only time I write in a journal is as a last resort to try and process my emotions that I don’t want to deal with—a stress response of sorts. At this moment, I feel like my identity is noticeably shifting. I’ve been quite immersed in all things Hawaii, not as much as during my childhood there but definitely a lot more than before. Part of it is because I’m considering delving deeper into research related to this place on a larger scale, and part of it is because I feel I’m catching up to what I’ve missed out on for a long time by pushing away. So in feeling like my identity is in a bit of a state of flux, the way it is shaping how I think about research is also shifting, especially as we continue to learn about indigenous methodologies.

During this week's entry, journal writing became an accountability move, serving as a process of understanding myself by textualizing what I did and didn't know. Recognizing what I was (still) learning proved that I was further from understanding many cultural aspects of my home community than I had thought.

July 4, 2022

“No [researcher] is an island”

I see an opportunity and a responsibility to voice ... concerns in research from the ever-fluid position of insider/outsider. But at the same time, I have to acknowledge that reflexivity and relationality and all these tasks toward ethical research approaches are all so absolutely exhausting, especially for those of us who sometimes need to recharge in our own ways. For this reason, I really value building trust with researchers and those outside of scholarly work who can tell me openly but kindly if, when, what, where, how I need to shift. Who know what I'm aiming for and how far I am from the mark. In addition to listening to, working with/in, and being accountable to a community, I want to apply those same approaches to how I interact with other researchers, as a give-and-take practice of reciprocity (our favorite word). It's sometimes really easy to feel isolated in what we're doing.

This entry, inspired by the John Donne poem, “No Man Is an Island,” felt like I was coming up for air—a crucial reset wherein I realized that I can and must do my part to both listen and share. Suddenly, there were many in the “murky middle,” moving in our own ways, but together.

July 19, 2022

Has anyone seen my rug? It got pulled out from under me

Last week and this week were very hard for me because in addition to [the] reading[s], I read some book chapters related to my in-progress paper that abruptly changed the way I see myself in relation to power, positionality, and privilege. To preface, you all have likely heard me talk or write about the aspect of my positionality specifying that I am from Hawai‘i but am not Native Hawaiian. I knew enough about Hawai‘i's plantation history to realize that no one in my family on either side was native to that land but rather came over 100+ years ago for the specific purpose of working as laborers in the fields. I was perhaps naïve and just plain inattentive, but I always saw Hawai‘i—my home and the

only place I would ever call home—as an intriguing melting pot where we came over because we were meeting a need, and now we largely all get along within our local culture that we all contributed to. We were invited ... weren't we? We were helping ... right? This diversity and co-existence is proof of 'success'? We all come together for the strength of our lāhui (nation/people)?

This entry opened the door to a clearer understanding of settler migration history, complicity in relation to Kānaka Maoli, and necessary humility before I could continue my research trajectory. Never before had I questioned or acknowledged the (inadvertent) harm that I was a part of within a colonial system. The feeling of increased separation, of being understandably forever at arm's length from the only place I could call home, destabilized everything. Through the end of the class, I focused on making sense of it.

August 3, 2022 Not me crying ...

I spent ... this class crying from the readings, which focused heavily on decolonizing methodologies that I had not encountered before—ideas that resonated with me so much as I constantly struggle with being and feeling always-already someplace in between. I am moved to tears very easily, which is fine ... While this summer has been extremely emotional for me, it has also been extremely valuable. Probably the most exciting part of the class/summer was the additional readings I did into Native Hawaiian research methodologies. I still have quite a lot of caution about jumping into and/or committing to research connecting to where I'm from. I have done much soul-searching and learning about my heritage(s) and the areas I want/need to focus on to address my cultural knowledge gaps and limitations as a researcher, regardless of whether my research interests continue in this area. In reading about the Hawaiian methodologies, there was so much that I connected with regarding how I approach life in general; to see this worldview applied to research was both invigorating and reassuring to me about who I am and where I come from, even if I will always be partly outsider because of not being Indigenous. Learning from those methodology books in tandem with our weekly readings was really helpful, and I felt an infectious desire to keep reading and learning about those methodologies. It may seem a strange way to describe it, but those texts almost felt alive to me. They are not static ideas; they are living and breathing.

The most difficult part of the class/summer was when I stumbled upon additional readings that shed light on the Asian settler colonial role from Hawaii's plantation days, in which my ancestors on both sides were complicit in the ongoing and now multi-layered subjugation of Native Hawaiians. It made me rethink my formerly casual usage of words such as 'local' to describe myself and 'my roots' to describe the land where I am 'from.' These words are much more loaded than I had previously afforded the space for them to be properly delineated in my writing and casual descriptions of myself. I am not entitled to occupy that space just because much time has passed since the events leading my family to reside there. These are the areas of my initially drafted positionality statement that I would and do plan to change. There needs to be some other way to explain my and my family's situation as non-white settlers while still establishing our longstanding residency and commitment to the place, people, and culture."

I know I cannot beat myself up over this, but it does feel strange to regret the way I wrote something when, even from one week to the next, I am making quite large-scale realizations that immediately affect what I am doing and writing. One thing is for sure—I am so excited to push the boundaries of including and even centering positionality in scholarly works because these types of readings have been what I am learning the most from these days. The researcher 'failures,' the reflections and lessons learned, the admitting of the need to pivot for the sake of strengthening ethical research approaches—that I as the researcher do not and cannot know without relational commitments to other people and lands. But in all of this, I promise to still have a careful and thoughtful approach during all processes of busting down walls. And to keep Kleenex nearby, just in case."

Making Sense from the Middle

The positionality course was the first time I had allowed myself to be radically honest as well as willingly and intentionally vulnerable amidst the difficult histories and complex cultural relationships that influence how I view the world and, in turn, how I would (inadvertently) affect my research. While it was easy for me to accept that I can never truly be an insider researcher in Hawai'i, I faced frustration and embarrassment in finally realizing and acknowledging my complicity in Asian settler colonialism in Hawai'i. I came to terms with my own identity and history, which was difficult but necessary. I recognized that there is

so much I don't know and can never know. I needed these shifts in perspective to go forward with my research, and I came to these conclusions transparently with the rest of my class reading about it. I'm not a risk-taker and am not particularly keen on being vulnerable, but I saw a safe space to have my reckoning, and I took the leap. Here is what came out of it.

I am both marginalized and marginalizing. Reading my positionality journals reflexively has helped me to consider how my research is always entwined with the histories and stories of other people. As I think back to the dominant cultural narratives I grew up with, it bothers me that the groups I descended from did not (and largely still do not) prioritize a returning of power to Kānaka Maoli in their own land. I recognize that I do have an important story to tell—as a biracial Asian woman from Kaua'i—but it is one that inherently threatens to become yet another narrative that eclipses Kānaka Maoli stories and voices. I know my story matters, but I don't think it matters *more than*.

While I am considered multiply-marginalized where I am now, and in academia broadly, my Asian settler heritage places me in a majority of many sociopolitical contexts in Hawai'i. I am caught in between, wondering what happens when a counterstory from the middle starts to cut two ways—disrupting a dominant narrative while also taking up the space of another marginalized group. My very existence is situationally marginalized and marginalizing. How should a story like mine be told, if at all? What is my responsibility, and who am I held accountable to? It feels selfish of me to even wonder where this leaves me—with more questions than answers—but my hope is that this introduces an important scholarly discussion. I am not the only one in this position, right here and right now.

Balance and bravery defeat doubt. I want to represent myself and my connections appropriately, but it's hard to strike a balance between the expectation to articulate who I am in the research while not making it all about me. Even as I take measures to de-center myself, I can't fully prevent my imprint from being on everything I do as the researcher. Thus, especially in research relating to Hawai'i, I need to disclose both who I am and why I am the one to tell a particular research story. I need to be thorough and relevant, without overdoing it. I need to try and situate myself in the murkiness, make it as clear as it can be. There are many times that I don't know whether I'm capable of it.

What scares me, as a graduate student and novice researcher, is the likelihood of writing it all wrong—of scholars in my field deeming my articulations of positionality insufficient or even problematic. I need and appreciate such scholarly accountability, and I expect my writerly life to be a monumental mess of iterations, but I am completely intimidated. Additionally, I'm worried that instead of doing something good with the knowledge and perspective I've gained about my positionality and how to articulate it, I won't be able to discern certain methodological boundaries—that I will inevitably make mistakes and learn lessons, but that those failures will be inexcusable. Self-doubt permeated my journal entries

and my thoughts, but the more I revised my positionality statement, throughout the course and afterward, the less worried I became. More people read it by way of peer review. I kept changing it as I myself kept changing. I read what others wrote and gave feedback too. Give and take, and editing.

I admit that during the ongoing process of trying to understand myself and articulate my positionality, my frequent crying turned to wallowing, to journaling, to questioning all my choices, to changing my dissertation direction, and will most likely move back to more crying. What I learned is that I can embrace the uncertainty, even as I keep grasping to make sense of where I am. I can question whether to keep pursuing a particular line of research because of my positionality. I can pivot. The middle will always be confusing, but the middle is home.

I encourage engaging fearlessly with positionality in research. Come find me in the middle. We'll be brave there.