Practicing Decoloniality 3/3: Decolonizing Dilemmas with a “z”

On Wednesday 22nd February 2017, PhD students at the Gender Institute organised a roundtable discussion and interactive workshop titled Practicing Decoloniality in Gender Studies. This short series of posts presents the transcripts of the three speakers’ discussion papers, concluding today with Amanda Shaw’s reflections on decolonizing dilemmas.

Awa or Kava Kava (Piper methysticum) processing. Image credits to the author.

My research concerns gendered labour within food systems in Hawai‘i. How did a once self-sustaining archipelago become reliant on food imports? This is an agricultural paradox that Hawai‘i is not alone in experiencing and it can be understood in relation to the promises of international trade, global flows of capitalism and in relation to colonialism – specifically settler colonialism.

The Pacific Islands of Hawai‘i have been occupied by the U.S. since a coup ousted the independent government in 1893 and Hawai‘i became a U.S. state in 1959. The advent of private property dispossessed Native Hawaiians on a massive scale, enabled white settlers to accumulate land and then meant that sugar planters brought people from Asia, Europe and the Pacific to work on plantations.

This kind of plantation agriculture is a central part of colonial projects, as it both literally and symbolically remakes the landscape as well as transforms social relations. Food and agriculture systems offer interesting sites through which to analyse how settler colonial states are maintained and capital is accumulated, in racialised, classed and gendered ways. They are also important sites to understand how these projects are resisted – through, for example, discourses of food sovereignty and in Hawai‘i, of aloha ʻāina, caring for the land.

My work has tried to unravel some of these threads using multi-sited ethnography. And it may come as no surprise that participation and observation in very different food spaces can be entangling. Specifically, doing gender work as a white settler feminist in decolonising spaces has raised several questions for me.

Firstly, from my specific location, what does it look like to support decolonising movements, even when it is not always clear that such projects have taken on the insights of Native, Native Hawaiian and other anti-imperialist feminists that show how decolonising work is intertwined with gendered and sexual self-determination? And, in a different vein, what are the dangers of centering
participation in decolonising spaces, if part of what characterises settlerhood is the propensity to indigenise oneself and lay claim to Native knowledge?

I could spend my time responding to and unpacking these two questions alone. But these dilemmas are sort of just the tip of the iceberg and in the interest of unsettling the submerged, I want to offer something otherwise. So I shall follow the examples of my co-conspirators who have already shared very brave words, and will offer a poem.

The poem follows the form of the alphabet memory game, “I’m going on trip and I’m bringing with me.....”. This version goes something like “I’m coming back from fieldwork and I’m bringing with me....”

I call it “Decolonize with A Z: Patchwork Dictionary for Settlers”

A is for acute decolonising dilemmas

Of where do I appear and when?

Am I an ally

An accomplice?

Another academic?

B is built on ambivalence

Bridges called backs

Barter and betrayals

As in

C for critique

And for settlers suspending the craft

cutting down on killing joy

loosening our grip on objects most dear

learning decolonial lessons in letting go

D is for decentering, divesting, de-authorising

for difference and accounting

for making homes in the unhospitable
which is already a privilege

E is for enduring impasses
and ongoing tensions
for unsure embraces
and uncertain expanses – instead of enclosures

F for the friends that help us

G is for giving, in all its phrasal forms
giving up, giving in
giving way
giving out

H is for healing
And

I, for looking inward just an instant

J, what else but justice?

K, collective Kuleana
rights, responsibility, mandate
guiding our different work on different land

L for Liliʻuokalani
A steadfast Queen
And for long lines of
M for mana wahine, women divine and powerful
for mōʻi, old time leaders
And māhū, healer-teachers
Maybe also for moe aku, moe mai,
sleeping here, sleeping there
For the lāhui re-membering,
And for settlers, learning for the first time

N for this never being enough

O not for owning
but for owning up

For P, what was made pilau

For Q, Queen Lili‘u‘u again

the R is for remembering
not romanticising
Although there may be some love
in these re-workings of the past

S the English Sovereignty
That doesn’t save but may sustain

T is for translations
for the frustrated tiredness
of words not transcribed
for the trust bestowed in stories
which are not mine to tell
as much as settlers love to sell a gift

U – unsettling futures
ones not built in my name

V for the violence doubled over into writing

One “W” for the “what” I write
Another, for the “what” that I don’t

X marks the spot
signs a signature
marks the theft
stole the land
formed the subjecthood
held up by the

Y
at the end
of property

But
before the end

There’s the Z
in decolonize.

I’m going on a voyage
And I’m taking with me
Decolonizing dilemmas
Alphabetic inspirations

Ever clearer kuleana.

Hawaiian Language Glossary

kuleana: Right, privilege, concern, responsibility, title, business, property, estate, portion, jurisdiction, authority, liability, interest, claim, ownership, tenure, affair, province; reason, cause, function, justification; small piece of property, as within an ahupua’a; blood relative through whom a relationship to less close relatives is traced, as to in-laws. Source: Wehewehe.org For more see Goodyear-Kaopua, N. (2011). Kuleana Lahui: Collective responsibility for Hawaiian nationhood in activists’ praxis. Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action, 5(1).


mana wahine: this term is often associated with Māori feminist writings, which Simmonds describes as “about recognising the authority, dignity, and power (the mana) of Māori women” (Simmonds 2011: 13). This and other terms have also been used in Hawaiian. Source: Simmonds, N. (2011). Mana wahine: Decolonising politics. Women’s studies Journal, 25(2), 11.

mōʻi: King, sovereign, monarch, majesty, ruler, queen. (Perhaps related to ʻi, supreme. According to J. F. G. Stokes, the word moʻi, king, is of recent origin and was first in print in 1832.) Temple image (Malo 162); lord of images (Malo 173); according to Kepelino and Kamakau, a rank of chiefs who could succeed to the government but who were of lower rank than chiefs descended from the god Kāne (For. 6:266). See ikūnu‘u. The term mōʻi was apparently not used in the Fornander legends collected in the 1860s nor in RC. Source: Wehewehe.org For more see: Kameʻeleihiwa, L. (1992). Native land and foreign desires. Bishop Museum Press.

Amanda is a fourth year PhD student. Her research explores agricultural work in Hawai‘i from an intersectional perspectives. She was raised on O‘ahu, Hawai‘i and traces her family origins back to the British Isles, Scandinavia and parts of Western Europe via Appalachia and the Ozark mountains. She is a member of Sea of Islands Consulting group [http://www.seaofislandsconsulting.com/](http://www.seaofislandsconsulting.com/).

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