

Conference Presentation

Hawaiian Hermeneutics and the Triangulation of Meaning: Gross, Subtle, Causal

"If knowledge is power then understanding is liberation"

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If knowledge is power then understanding is liberation. What does that really mean, and how does that relate to Indigenous research issues? What is hermeneutics and what do we bring as Indigenous people to the dialogue? Can the experience of hermeneutics escort us into Paulo Freire's "Critical Consciousness" phase in his Theory of Conscientization? Will we wake up or stay asleep with regard to how best to research/understand, and thus educate our children in this time of homogenization, fear, and amoral intentions.

To start this discussion of interpretation and why this focus aids us as Indigenous educators and researchers, I believe we need to begin with the idea of Need, or how best to be of service to our community. What are the needs we must address within ourselves, our family, our community, and within our distinct and evolving cultures? What, truly, are the issues we need to understand? That's what hermeneutics teaches me. Research for us is not simply about asking "burning questions" we want resolved, but rather, we are answering a call to be of use. We must develop the right orientation to ourselves and our place first. The very idea of knowledge is now in question across all nations, and as we develop a deeper experience of our own epistemology, do you see where we're heading? We're heading into our own radical remembering of our future. This is where I live now: in a fully lucid present that experiences the "deeper significance of the things seen." (Nityananda)

Did you know that we have some Hawaiian communities with 80-100% of all teenagers addicted to ice? We also have rural communities with Hawaiians as 100% of their special education population. Some of our very best and brilliant Hawaiian educators are still not licensed as public school teachers because of their inability to pass the Math Praxis Test—a nationally standardized test without any correlation to teaching excellence. This emphasis on one type of mathematic understanding has become a cultural gatekeeper for teachers in many states. The disparity can no longer be kept hidden. The rift between *human efficacy* and what it means to be smart in today's society is defined via caricature. We are becoming cardboard cutouts of what it truly means to feel, to be alive, to think. We see this disconnect in public schools' lust for homogeneity and control, and our Hawaiian private schools' preoccupation with capitalism, competition and national standards. Who knows, maybe now the basic contradiction of Education in Hawai'i

will be answered: How best can we educate our unique and diverse children via mass colonial education? And you can bet the answer will not be found in typical special education classes. The focus that weaves within our research at this pivotal time in history is a dialectic one that holds the potential to liberate us. The polemic preoccupation we have been muddling about in no longer holds sway in my spirit. We must get on to the wholeness we believe in, and this must reflect in our work, in our writing, in our deepest dreams.

The question I have when our own Indigenous researchers return with gloomy statistics: *Why nihilism?* Why don't we see these negative statistics of our people as symptoms of something larger and potentially healing? Why not experience these statistics as philosophical, or cultural? I mean, really, why is it that we wish to assimilate into a mainstream society that believes in the accumulation of material goods as the highest indicator of "wealth" or senseless death, war, as more appropriate than life? Why, again, are we seen and labeled "deficient"? Do you see that when we understand larger systems that are working, we begin to understand more of what's happening within and around ourselves? And because of that knowing, we are singing our own liberation.

It's time. It's time because the world needs our clarity, and we need our own. The following discussion of hermeneutics comes from first looking at epistemology. The segue from knowledge and the qualities of what we value as "intelligence" was necessary so that we can now ask: *"Whose knowledge are we talking about?"* Here is the key, the turning point in all things I have considered these past five years. I call it "Hawaiian Hermeneutics" because I am a Hawaiian and I'm focusing on "who is talking" and "who is the I that is listening?" I have learned from my kupuna, respected elders, and from many scholars around the globe. All ideas come from ancient systems and they have helped me learn how to think.

Hermeneutics: The Art and Science of Interpretation

"Our knowledge can be viewed from many different perspectives, and all hold truth."
(Anneke Scout)

This paper on hermeneutics focuses on the fact that we as Hawaiians are waking up and realizing that there is a voice behind the booming illusion of Research. A voice. An interpretation. *A culture.* With regard to the culture of education, health, land stewardship, justice, and economic sustainability in Hawai'i—the voice is American and we are discovering that with all the trappings of literacy, modernity, and power, American culture is still young, struggling, and self-serving. I know this is an extremely reductionistic and simplified description, but these times call for bluntness, even at the risk of predictable backlash. I write from my viewpoint only. Call this style, message and messenger what you wish. It no longer seems to matter as we awaken from our own slumber of apathy and fear and "Private Property" signs as portals to our homes.

Jean Houston's prophecy is coming to pass because the consciousness that solves a problem can no longer be the same consciousness that created it. The same is true for Indigenous research. We are trying to articulate a new/ancient consciousness that is no longer interested in why Hawaiian youth don't score as well as their American counterparts on the SAT. *That is not our question.* It is, rather, a

matter of reinterpretation—of redefining the things of value with regard to knowledge and how we wish to live out our lives. We have choices here. And I know we don't think we do—it's the nature of oppression and control embedded in well-meaning directives to keep volition a rare experience and expression of self a crime.

We simply have to see the SAT and other standardized tests as part of the larger triangulation of meaning—Body, Mind, Spirit—to realize that they are just one indicator of something. One among many! Here is our challenge: How to withstand the ravages of one way of thinking among the fullness and complexity of what it means to differ, to stand in juxtaposition, to be a Self that unifies *on its own terms*. Here is what culture is teaching us now. It is no longer simply about race—the blood quantum spiral going nowhere. It will be about the values and practices of a people found in a place. It will be about the consciousness of culture. Culture: Gross, subtle, causal. Place, space, time. Exterior, interior, transpatial. Empiricism, rationalism, transcendentalism. 'Ike, 'ike, 'ike. To see; to know; to be given insight—a Hawaiian way to push the boundaries of what empiricism and experience can mean. Does mean.

*GROSS: First point in the Triangulation of Meaning
Objective, Body, Physical*

*"I believe we carry our values in our bodies.
We carry our culture in our bodies." (Peese Pitsiulak, Inuit)*

If a people developed relationship with a place and people for countless generations, they will be in full dialogue with what that place and people have to teach. These are epistemological points that bring us to ancient clarity that highly mobile Americans often do not possess: (a) place educates, (b) beauty develops our thinking, and (c) time is not simply linear. Knowing what type of limu, seaweed, washes on Hāmākua shores during winter swells brings up the idea of external knowing, a "seeing" if you will, of what is present in the moment of experience. Relationship with place allows for gross knowing of all aspects of environment and allows for a stretching toward the rational and transcendental. This gross level is the lowest form of knowledge production *but it is nonetheless instrumental* in developing fundamental principles from which all knowledge flows. It is not that spirituality collapses into a physics explanation, it is rather the starting point in which to engage in the multifaceted experience of our specific Indigenous epistemology.

With regard to research, the gross part of knowing something is collecting the data, the "hard" facts, the descriptions, what you notice. It has become infinitely clear that you will notice differently if you come from a distinct cultural background. This is a good thing! Never apologize for what you bring to the table. It does not matter how famous your MA or PhD advisor is. It is no longer appropriate to belittle your own interpretation of the world. The truth is it never was. It was most likely our way of adapting. Even at this beginning stage, our data will differ because we experience the world differently. Simple. That point is the cornerstone of hermeneutics and why we must work through this idea. Honor this difference with clear descriptions of what you or your people are experiencing. If appropriate, bring in the richness of how we can discuss an object, an idea, a moment. It is

precisely here, at the center of what experience means, where we must be clear. It is at all points of this triangulation where our collective Self must come to bear.

"But will it also be thought strange that education and knowledge of the world have enabled us to perceive that as a race we have some special mental and physical requirements not shared by the other races which have come among us?" (Queen Lili'uokalani, 1898, Last reigning monarch of Hawai'i)

I believe that all knowledge is truly empirical—our job is simply to expand the idea of what empiricism/experience means. We know with every fiber of our body that knowledge is more than an external experience only. You do, don't you? Perhaps I'm assuming too much here. Because hermeneutics teaches us that *all knowledge is an interpretation*, then there must have been a large mob who agreed that information-recall, along with the speed with which one can recall that information, is the highest form of intelligence. This is evident in our TV quiz shows and crossword puzzles where knowledge is more a novelty than functioning as an integrated whole. There is even a physical scoring rubric that outlines such ideas as an intelligence quotient or IQ. Knowledge in this model is outside, physical, and it can be graphed. It is deductive, gross, and typically empirical—which means it comes from one form of experience, often "second-hand" as discovered via books, other thinkers, and other observers. Literacy is the main vehicle bringing information to all those who ascribe to its priority and efficacy. Books are them. Books are also part of us. Literacy is an important tool—one among many.

This is a relatively new idea! The languaging of American intelligence comes with specific vocabulary, a speedy disposition, and with very prescribed ways of seeing the world. I refer to these ideas as gross hermeneutic policies that deflate our potential by not remaining critical of all three levels of consciousness that make us fully human. So let us return to what they are.

*SUBTLE: Second point in the Triangulation of Meaning
Subjective, Mind, Rational*

"Understanding the world in its totality leads us to the idea of god, or reality, and to an active and intellectual love of that reality ... only then do we see the world in its fullness." (Richard Osborne summarizing Spinoza)

Here is the rational side to an idea, a looking via conscious agency, a way to digest an experience—an aesthetic appreciation, a knowing born from multiple vantage points. Here is where objective data runs into rational thinking—an interior experience with thoughts, images, and time. If empiricism is shaped by our organs of discernment, our five senses, then the subtle part of this hermeneutic triangulation of meaning is all about subjectivity—the nuance of fact. Even reason is not spared from this truth. Reason, it ends up, is still *just an interpretation*. Of course, philosophers are shouting anti-intellectual remarks as they line up behind their own relativistic arguments that boil down epistemological diversity into clichés and shadows of identity thrown against walls of gross matter. It is a predictable backlash from positivistic scholars who hold the subjective as an unwanted stepchild to objective data. In this subtle point/subjective self, body-centric knowing expands into metaphor via *mind*. Subtle consciousness confirms this evolution

because the origin of how and what one discerns from experience then becomes a conscious act, a growing up so to speak. Subtle awareness deepens what we may know about something. We may advance through the hierarchy of interpretation when our external reality is experienced along with the symbolic, personal, and interior knowing we have learned to hide in third-person reporting.

And of course, Indigenous minds have a vastness of rationality to draw from. Our thinking is distinct. We know this. Of course this affects how we do research because how we view, how we think, how we witness the world is born from sustained consciousness. It is still present in the what and how we think. Don't doubt this! It is critical at this time to dig deeper into the wellspring of our own subjectivity. We are not "dumbing down" methodology when we wish to sit and listen—for years. It is a process, and the subtle category of mind development is all about respecting this process. Of course we must educate those around us in our institutions. Remember, most researchers will have no idea of what we're talking about. We must persevere in our path, and that will often take us into the teaching role with our own committees.

Body and Mind are not separate. Na'auao teaches us this. Viscera, intelligence, wisdom, heart. We do not simply think with our bodies, *we are our thinking*, but not in the Descartes view. Interpretation leads us into conscientization. We are waking up! *Cogito ergo interpretatio*. We exist therefore we interpret. Everything. The subtle category of consciousness reminds us that how we view the world is a matter of what we value, where we live, what we think about ourselves, and whether or not we can survive this hailstorm of disapproval when we disagree with mainstream ideals, which we do. We really do! The causal/spirit category of consciousness brings this idea home. Let's go for a swim.

CAUSAL: Third Point in the Triangulation of Meaning Transcendental, Spirit, Contemplation

"Experience and moving into another realm of being is valuable because we don't believe the concrete world is the only reality." (Rubellite Kawena Johnson, 4-11-97)

Here is the contemplative experience, the final knowing that there is always more to know. The contradiction at this level is we know more with less. A quietude. A silence. A way to be. Here is the space where dualities no longer make sense as separate ideas but as vital sequences into the all encompassing Self that unfolds through time and space. This third level of consciousness *includes* gross and subtle; outside and inside; empirical and rational. This final category does not need verification within typical empirical methods. It is a summation of a lived life. A balancing. A deeper understanding of why we're here. It is not so concerned with how we're here, or even with the here. It is spirit, the deep animating principle found in matter. Fundamental principles shape us whether we believe in them or not. Cause and Effect as the flower and seed of a lotus blossom. Flower and Seed. Roots and Wings. Agency and Communion. Male and Female. Day and Night. Here is the idea of the *Dialectic of Research*—knowing that we can hold polar truths as part of the one truth (i.e., higher education has the potential of educating us in one way and dumbing us down in another). At the causal stage, all dualities merge and knowledge becomes less a *thing* than an event, a stirring, a final reaching in.

What does this have to do with research? I believe it is at the very core of what has animated me. Place. Kupuna. Pono. Justice. Ancient ideas that are rarely serviced with words. Here is the shifting contradiction that we all face: How do we make what is amorphous solid? How to discuss cultural realities that are out of context with people who struggle with their own fractured cosmology. It's time. We are needed to step forward into our own causal knowing. Everything connects. We are all part of a larger whole. This third point of triangulation reminds us of our own history. We were/are people who understand this final point because we value it.

The spiritual facet of epistemology is fundamental to those who know the personalities of rain and the temperament of stone. This final triangulation point of meaning does not depend on scores and a teacher's approval. It is a present-state awareness of all that is possible. It is non-judgment via discernment. Spiritual efficacy and knowledge is a basic tag team that gets misdirected the moment one collapses all knowledge sources as only gross or subtle; body or mind; external and internal.

*A'ohe pau ka 'ike
There is no end to knowledge*

Knowledge is an ever expanding experience with all three levels of perception available to us—on a good day. On a difficult day, it is a test on a chapter we failed to read because friends came over instead. The causal level of consciousness is about meaning, purpose, and boundless joy. It is a fully noted response to enduring questions that other levels cannot possibly answer. Causal knowledge is hardly a *thing* to attain, rather, it is a maturing of our very being. It's the Post-Conventional truth of Piaget. Causal awareness brings together all opposites and sees both their form and essence. And it is like all other essences. Causal knowledge breathes and deepens our connection to all things. All people. All ideas. It is not so much advanced as hidden by our own history and training. Even culture can obscure this clarity if the specificity of culture excludes and separates. And as we know as Hawaiians, culture can be a doorway into vastness and identity, and it can also be a portal to your own prison. Causal understanding opens this capacity to all who wish to expand their minds and release their intellect. Do you see how epistemology via our own hermeneutic clarity is an unfolding and dimensional experience? One doesn't stop at body-knowing only. That would be like saying: Making banana bread only requires flour and bananas. Causal knowledge is the fire that bakes the bread. It is the last duty we have in the kitchen. Well, that's if you've cleaned up the dishes.

Why this Discussion?

"Intentionality is the hallmark of consciousness." (Hüusserl)

Why on earth did you read this? Is there something here for you? Were you weighted down by the cultural baggage such words like epistemology and hermeneutics have? How did you navigate the three points of the Triangulation of Meaning? What do you think of those ideas relative to your own life? Do you see the flow of knowledge as something helpful for your life?

Information → Knowledge → Understanding

Well, actually, it can be a circle with reflection and practice always unfolding upon itself. Cause and Effect playing itself out in all facets of our day: via dialogue, ideals, friendships, placement of our furniture. Everything as a reflection of your praxis. Everything an expression of our own interpretation of life. Why not wake up then?

“There are only participants in emancipation. You can only force slavery; you can’t force a person to be free.” (Ken Wilber)

Why not wake up? Why not extend ourselves into cooperatives instead of individual pursuits? Why not discern instead of judge? Why not deepen our knowledge systems into understanding and liberation instead of short-term recall of semi-useless information? Why not engage with our world in meaningful ways? Why are we not recycling? Why do we insist our physical and mental world is not affected by our ignorance? What is that really about?

Here is the challenge we now have in education and in life—How to step beyond traps of less and more, better or worst, gifted and talented or special education. How to educate, to lead forward, the next generation looking for substance and dimension in a flat-land of gross knowing. How to engender agency within communion and strength within flexibility? How on earth are we to evolve when money equates to intelligence and the manipulation of lower forms of knowledge? We are slaves in our own system of denial and two-dimensional epistemology. Yes, why not wake up?

It will mean movement. A change is here. Why not stand up and speak your spirit? Our sensual cues—the gross matter of our intelligence; our rational stirrings—the subtle matter of our knowing; our causal presence—connecting us to all ideas, all people, all stars. We have moments left on this planet. Why not teach and learn about endless ways to love, to listen, to participate? Why not joy in each others company?

Let us all sing our release. Let us all begin the dance of absolute knowing. Even in our institutions of higher learning, let us love. Let us learn to love again. And it will be as Audre Lorde has predicted: it will matter less and less whether we are afraid because we will finally understand that we are *‘ohana holo’oko’a*—we are each family.