

[Working Paper] Losing Idealism, Finding Connection: Reflections on Early Fieldwork toward Artistic Bilingualism



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All right, I'll say it: I came into this research project naïve and idealistic.¹ *I get to spend three to four months learning an ethnic artistic tradition from an expert? Yes! I've been waiting my whole life for an excuse to learn art from a master.* I imagined so many enchanting scenarios, each quixotic vision littered with cultural stereotypes. Of course, all of these thoughts ended with me in a trusted, personal relationship with my mentor, a true kindred soul, and they all ended with me deeply connected into the society and culture I had so humbly learned from, and they all ended with me a verified master of the chosen artistic tradition, to the awe and celebration of my wise teacher. In reality, they all just ended. First I had to find a mentor. Then I had to use precious time and exert extra energy to learn the most basic entry point into the artistic form. I was ready to learn and be changed by the process, but to try to continue that amidst a worldwide pandemic—*Can I get a raincheck, please?*

One of my primary interests and motivations in starting this project was to have a personal and meaningful relationship with my mentor. It's no exaggeration to say that for much of my life I wanted the kind of connection between a teacher and a student, a master and an apprentice, that was holistic and personal, someone who cares for me as a person and teaches me as an expert, and I reciprocate with esteem and loyalty. There's likely some childhood baggage there, I know. And I was coming into this research from an ethnographic experience last year where, despite my best intentions, my relationships with my cultural informants never really got off the ground, and in some ways floundered. I consider myself an amicable guy, so it was challenging to experience the lack of reciprocity. In "The Challenges of Human Relations in Ethnographic Enquiry," Nicole Beaudry (2008) writes, "Human relationships not only influence the quality of my work but are what makes fieldwork a meaningful experience" (245). I wanted my relationships in the field to make the experience meaningful for me, and yet during this project I noticed a disconnect between that desire and the desire to complete my work.

Another motivation I had was learning an artistic tradition that's foreign to my experience. That motivation is made up of a couple of different interests. First, I am a learner at heart, so the

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joy of picking up something new and playing with it—a book, a game, a thought, an instrument, anything—is ever-present. Similarly, my motivation was what Laurent Aubert (2007) says is “for the simple pleasure of sharing an experience and the artistic cultural enrichment it offers” (77). Second, I had the hope (and still do, to some extent) of becoming proficient in the artistic tradition. Be an expert, sure, maybe far down the road, but at the very least I want to be good at what I learn and understand its features and functions. Tempering my idealism, Aubert writes that the road to expertise is difficult (77).

For my research, I began learning *kahiko* (ancient) Hawaiian hula. Having taken a semester each of ballet and musical theater dance during my undergrad years, and having performed in musicals, I had a basic familiarity with choreographed and disciplined body movement coming into this project. In Mantle Hood’s (1960) seminal essay, “The Challenge of Bi-Musicality,” he argues that one’s body must engage considerably with the music one intends to learn, because to know it is first and foremost to do it (55). This is even truer of an art form that requires the use of one’s body, like hula. I don’t typically use my body to its fullest potential (not by a long shot), and I’ve been interested in taking dance lessons, so I was looking forward to the experience of coming under the discipline of hula.

There’s a popular meme floating around the internet: a cartoon drawing of a character sitting at a table with a cup of coffee, and everything around him is in flames. The character, with a blank stare on his face and no intention of moving, says simply, “This is fine.” For me, my experience in this research project began with the naïve belief that “This is fine, I’m in control.” Then, after a couple days, I started to see the flames. They grew hotter and thicker. Several setbacks forced me to the moment where I had to admit, “This is not fine, I’m not in control.” Honesty in a moment of panic. Eventually, as research become more challenging with the United States shutting down due to COVID-19, I came to the place where I was finally able to say, “This is fine, I’m not in control.” It all started before the project even began.

My initial interest was to learn an artistic tradition from Asia, either a visual art (like Chinese calligraphy) or some kind of crafting with my hands—pottery, furniture-making. Dance was a last resort, but I wanted to avoid the physical work if I could. I knew I did not want to do music—it seemed a common choice among my classmates who are much more musically inclined.

I figured it would take a little effort to find the artistic tradition and mentor I’d be working with. I also didn’t have any strong connections in Orlando, so I tried to get an early start. A week before class began, I conducted some preliminary web searches for “ethnic artists,” “ethnic art in Orlando,” and similar categories. I knew whatever I did find would be a cold lead. I made inquiries at cultural centers and ethnic publications around the city, as well as the local university, relying on my charm and genuine curiosity to get my foot in the door. Of course, I didn’t really get anywhere. I begrudgingly opened myself up to dance, and music remained a last resort.

I also decided to cast a broad net on Facebook. Pretty quickly a friend tagged one of her friends, and someone else messaged me privately to point to the same person, saying he was pretty well connected into various local ethnic communities. So I sent him a message, while continuing my cold leads from online searches. After a few days, he responded, asking me to call with more

information. Several days later, I had the name and number of someone he said might be willing to help me with my research. In retrospect, three weeks to secure a mentor doesn't seem too long. But when you have a perfect scenario in mind, as I did, two days of silence on the other side of a Facebook message feels like forever.

My first call with Teuruhei "Tee" Buchin-Cruz was thrilling for me. Of Tahitian–Hawaiian descent, Teuruhei is a cultural practitioner and advocate. I was finally talking to someone who might teach me a "Polynesian artistic tradition." I explained my project requirements and listened to her response of questions, ideas, and concerns. She seemed interested yet hesitant. "Before I take you on," she warned me, "you need to understand the hierarchy of respect." I was eager for my first steps into her culture. Essentially, she said, if we entered into this mentor–apprentice relationship, I would be expected to submit to her *'ike*, her knowledge, and not go seeking other sources or input from others who claim to be an expert. "There's many people out there who imitate us, but they don't know us," she said, "and they misrepresent us." I assured her of my commitment and sincere intentions. After all, "[h]uman relationships . . . are what makes fieldwork a meaningful experience" (Beaudry 2008, 245), right? She said she would get back to me, and I felt positive when we hung up.

Unfortunately, the next week and a half were slow and discouraging. I waited a couple days to give her space (I didn't want to seem too eager or annoying), and when we talked next, I was confused. We tried to clarify our positions, but things stayed muddy. I had tried to explain my need to focus on only one artistic tradition, either from Tahiti or Hawaii, and I could tell she was resistant.

That weekend she invited me to observe a Tahitian dance workshop. During a break, she introduced me to her daughter, who is a few years younger than me, and she asked me questions about my research and where I came from. I sensed she was playing a gatekeeper role, though I don't know for sure. They shared a meal with me and a couple of their close friends. Then, after lunch, Teuruhei and I talked face-to-face for more than an hour. I attempted to re-explain what I needed to move forward with her and my research, reiterated my interest in her culture, and listened a lot.

"We assumed," writes Beaudry (2008) of one of her earliest fieldwork experiences, "that difficulties encountered could result only from our own shortcomings because the informant was expected to be flawless. Within our assumptions the informant barely existed anyway—we were going to collect, and only incidentally to meet people" (228–29). What I found in this conversation with Teuruhei—and what changed me—was not a flawless person, but an actual person—I was meeting *her*. And in listening, I began to know her, not as the object of my research but the reason for it: her and all the people she represents.

Teuruhei told me of how Tahitians were the first to populate the Hawaiian Islands. "*Hula* comes from the Tahitian word *hura*." She told me about King Kamehameha I, who united all Hawaiian Islands into one kingdom that lasted nearly 100 years. She told me about King Kalākaua, his love for the Hawaiian people and how he revitalized the practice of hula. "He said that hula is the language of the heart, and therefore it is heartbeat of the Hawaiian people." She explained

how hula had been banned prior to that by missionaries. *I'm getting it.* So it survived underground. Then after King Kalākaua died, his sister, Liliuokalani, became queen until she was forcibly dethroned when Western businessmen overthrew the monarchy. *I'm seeing it.* “Queen Liliuokalani, she wrote ‘Aloha ‘Oe.’” I didn’t know that, but I was listening intently. “People think it’s about two lovers being apart and seeing each other again. But there’s a deeper meaning, a *kaona*.” I learned there’s often a *kaona* in Hawaiian chants and lyrics, and sometimes a *kaona* to the *kaona*. “It’s about Hawaiians and the land of Hawaii. Though we are apart, Queen Liliuokalani was saying one day we would be reunited with our home.” A tear dripped from Teuruhei’s eye. *I see it.*

From Teuruhei’s perspective, I had asked her to separate pieces of who she is and what her culture is for the sake of my research—a very Western approach. Even the idea of learning Hawaiian hula by itself, separate from the culture, ideology, crafts, and theology embedded in it, seemed incomplete to her (at best), and she needed space to weigh the matter with her conscience. I assured her I was ready and willing to listen and learn whatever she wanted to teach me about her culture—I was interested in it—and that my research itself would simply focus on hula as a dance form. We had finally reached a point of understanding, and whatever else she thought, I was no longer an intruder. “[H]uman interactions and the development of relationships [are] the real sources of learning in the field,” writes Beaudry (230). No argument there.

Teuruhei told me what she tells every hula student: “Your job as a hula dancer is to learn the meaning of the song and the *kaona* [deeper meaning].” Since hula began as “chants with motions,” she said the first thing I’d have to do was learn to *oli* (chant). Many times, she explained, a teacher would require the student to perfect their *oli* before being allowed to enter the place of learning (called a *halau*). I told her she didn’t have to go easy on me, as I wanted to learn as authentically as I could. She took a deep breath (*a sigh of relief?*) and replied, “You’re gonna die.”

My lessons were to be weekly for one hour, and I committed to myself that I would practice at least once in-between lessons. Each lesson began with chanting, followed by a time of breathing and meditation, and then practicing *kahiko* hula. Hula is always performed barefoot, to stay connected to the earth, so I took my flip-flops off whenever I entered, emptied my pockets, and began stretching. This was after greeting “Tee” with an embrace and cheek-to-cheek kisses. We practiced on tile floor in the foyer of her business office. Usually her husband was there working on various business projects, and sometimes other family members would come and go as well. I felt welcome and at ease. Unfortunately, I’ll never know what three months of this routine would have done for my foundation in hula and my relationship with Tee and her culture. We had four lessons like this, and then the world shut down due to COVID-19.

Still, as I reflect on that short month (of course it was February), I see that learning did take place. I had an experience with *kahiko* hula that went beyond “a nice cultural experience.” I would broadly categorize my learning of hula in three ways. First, I picked up a lot of new vocabulary. I learned words for the basic steps Tee taught me (*kaholo*, *hela*, *uehe*, *uweke*, *lele*) as well as directional words like *akau* (right), *hema* (left), *imua* (forward), *iho* (backward), and *huli* (to turn). Whenever my mentor wanted me to continue practicing the movements, she would command me to be ready (*ho’o mau kau kau*), and I had to snap into my *ha’a* (ready stance) and

declare, “Ae” (“Yes”). To delay or say otherwise, unless I was injured, was unacceptable. She would then begin striking her handheld gourd drum and call out movements. I also learned words significant to Hawaiian culture like *pono* (good, right, righteous), *aloha* (love), and *kaona*.

Second, I was introduced to the art of performing an *oli*, or chant. I learned two *olis*, one a “password” chant of eight lines between seven and fourteen syllables each, and another a chant of three lines and about twelve syllables each. Memorizing poetry in an unfamiliar language has challenges, though I believe my task was made easier by also being required to learn my mentor’s vocal cadence. Since I am easygoing and uncommanding by nature, using my voice with such force and intention was uncomfortable. This was compounded during my lessons when Teuruhei coached me to over-articulate the syllables. She once commented that my chanting sounded “Gregorian,” and worked with me to keep my voice from going too high in pitch. Two adjustments I made with my body helped with this: tilting my head lower (as opposed to raising my chin) and focusing on bringing the sound from my core (my *piko*). It’s something I couldn’t have taught myself. The discomfort was a mental wall to climb over early on, and as I practiced her cadence and the position of the *oli* in my body, I felt confidence enter me, even as I struggled.

Third, I began to hula dance. My *ha’a* was the grounding element of my movement learning: straight back and shoulders, hands straight across the chest with elbows straight out, knees bent beyond what’s comfortable while standing, and barefoot. Through all the basic movements I learned, my upper body was expected to remain stable. My shoulders could not sway, and my posture could not be broken. That was the ideal, of course—it was challenging just to keep my arms in the right place, let alone keep my upper body from leaning forward naturally in a semi-squatting position. *Hela* is a move of pointing forward with the foot from the *ha’a*. To help me get the feel for how far forward I needed to reach with my foot, Teuruhei had me reach over one whole floor tile, forcing me to bend my supporting leg further. She also noticed that I had a bad habit of keeping my toes up on my reaching foot when it touched the ground—my whole foot needed to be flat on the ground, toes included. In my greatest show of ineptness, once when I practiced on my own, I attempted to copy a coordinated whole-body movement I saw on one of the videos Tee had sent me. All I needed to do was travel forward four steps with *uehe* while steadily raising my hands across the four steps. The staccato of the legs matched with the even intensity of the arms was more than I could bear. The result of all this fumbling was a greater awareness of my own body’s habits and a deeper appreciation for those who make hula look effortless.

What connects all of these aesthetic bones into a breathing soul, though, is how hula carries the Hawaiian culture. Hula began, as Tee explained it, as “chants with motions.” Oral history and genealogy interpreted through the connection of voice, rhythm and body. As an expressive, embodied, ancient practice, hula comes from the core of the performer. The Hawaiian word for the middle of the body, the core, is *piko*. It’s closely associated with the idea of a person’s source of life—it’s the way one is connected (via the umbilical cord) to the mother, and her mother, and all of one’s ancestors. Hula is the key cultural good that connects Hawaiians to where they’ve come from and who they are. Like the stars that guided ancient Hawaiians across the oceans, hula serves to continue to point Hawaiians to their own shared identity. “Hula is the language of the heart,”

yes, but not just language. Not just vocal chants. Not just body movement. Hula is the piko of Hawaiians.

By the beginning of March, it was evident that COVID-19 would affect the US in some ways, if not my own life and research. On February 29, the first death in the US caused by the novel coronavirus occurred in Washington. Travel restrictions to and from the US began to be implemented (CNN, “Coronavirus Outbreak Timeline”). Coworkers who had recently returned from overseas were asked to isolate themselves for fourteen days. One month later, “self-isolate,” “social distancing,” and other COVID-related terms had gained so much traction in everyday use that they were added to the dictionary by Merriam-Webster in a “special update” (“We Added New Words” n.d.). On March 11, the WHO declared the virus a pandemic (CNN, “Coronavirus Outbreak Timeline”), and somehow in the midst of the panic, toilet paper became a scarce commodity. The virus’s damage hit home for me on March 14, when my wife’s sister, who lives with us, was laid off due to COVID’s impact on her industry. The following day I canceled my lesson with Tee so my family could help cheer up my sister-in-law. Circumstances never allowed another hula lesson. In a downward spiral of events, we suddenly found ourselves “sheltering in place,” caring for our toddler full-time while my wife and I each worked from our bedroom, unable to see friends, go to church, or even push our daughter on a swing.

Before my first hula lesson in early February, texting had become a common medium for reciprocation between me and Tee. Many times throughout this project, she texted me links to videos, along with her own commentary, which significantly added to my understanding of hula and Hawaiian culture. To Tee’s credit, I estimate about one-third of my learning happened virtually. At first, when my county began to lock down, I had hoped that my learning virtually could continue amidst the pandemic stress. I wondered if, in fact, we were already prepared for virtual lessons: my first lesson actually took place via texting. Tee was suffering from an allergy attack and didn’t want to meet, so she texted me the lines to the password chant, an explanation of it, a video with further background information, and finally a recording of her chanting the oli so I could hear her cadence. It worked pretty well despite her raspy voice. I found a lonely spot in a nearby park, memorized and practiced the oli, and then sent her a recording of my first full attempt. Unfortunately, even that scenario was idealistic for a pandemic-stressed time, and everyone, Teuruhei included, had their own troubles. So my research with her came to a sad stop.

I was disappointed—and angry, really. Not at Tee but at the situation itself. It was not the result I wanted for my hard work, and it was not how I had tried to steer things. I wish I could say I was empathetic toward Tee at first, but I was thinking not of her or her family, just myself. As I began to cut losses and move on, someone much wiser than me suggested I reach out to Tee with a compassionate text. No mention of research or hula, just *How are you and your family? I hope you’re doing ok in this craziness.* It was then that I recognized that I too, like Beaudry (2008), was currently in the field “to collect, and only incidentally to meet people” (228–29). *Do “[h]uman relationships . . . make fieldwork a meaningful experience” (245)? Yes, they do. So my research will have to change, or wait. People before product. I’m not in control. This is fine.* I did attempt to continue learning on my own, but I found it difficult to practice. I discovered that I needed Tee’s voice calling out movements for me to follow. I could not effectively practice in isolation.

I recognize in my ethnographic experience the beginnings of a journey into *artistic bilingualism*. Only a start, yes, but enough experience to draw out some themes and learn from them. For one thing, I acquired knowledge in my body of a world previously unknown to me. Coming into this project, I had expected to be challenged and stretched in the use of my body; what I could not anticipate was the *feeling* of the work *in my body* as my toes stretched and my thighs burned and my voice followed the path of an ancient rhythm from deep within. As Deidre Sklar (2000) writes, my “bodily memory” of movement became a primary source of knowing and understanding (75). This knowing by my body is intensified by the mental and relational connection I made with the Hawaiian culture through Teuruhei. It is akin to what Sklar points to when she states that “somatic and verbal experience” can be “mutually generative” (74), but it goes beyond the ethnographer’s interaction between his own words and body. In fact, what I’m describing is mutual generativity *outward* between my body’s experience of hula and my mentor’s—her ‘ike. My body’s experience came from hers, yes, but as it responded in reciprocity, further aspects of her ‘ike were awakened and shared back with me, generating further knowledge. I believe this is one reason that hula, with its particularly strong and rich tradition, has persisted beyond colonialism, annexation to the US, and eventual statehood and globalization: not only is it a mutually generative artistic tradition in itself (for it is neither an oral tradition nor a movement tradition, but both together), but as it is passed from generation to generation, it is mutually generative between *kumu* (master) and *haumāna* (student). Sharon Rowe (2008) argues that we should pay attention to indigenous epistemology (41). In the case of hula, what is passed down through the relationship of mentor and apprentice is more than a set of aesthetic facts—it is the embodiment of the Hawaiian culture.

In my case, the steps I took toward artistic bilingualism were actually toward *cultural bilingualism*. The hierarchy of respect required my attention to and reception of all Teuruhei gave me, along with my reciprocity of respect, curiosity, and dedication. To receive only movements and words would have been to reject what it means to practice the art of hula, to reject knowing a people’s culture embodied in a person.

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