

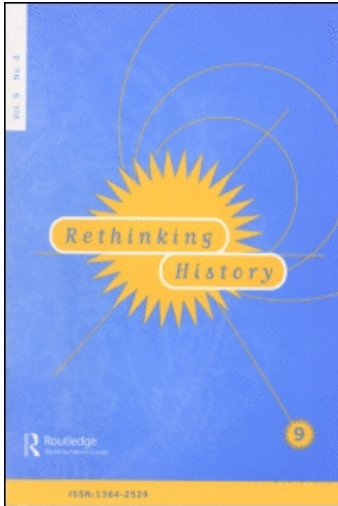
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Self and history

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This personal essay examines the author's personal and intellectual trajectory from his experiences growing up in a plantation in Hawai'i to his academic engagement with African and Asian American history. Constructing the essay around the polarities and unions of space and time, he explores the way the self and the scholar, multiply constituted by race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and nation, was and is a work in progress.

Keywords: intellectual craftsmanship; academic autobiography; Hawai'i; history; Botswana

I can only marvel at the possibility of systematic thought among plantation workers after a day's labour. Rising before the dawn with the smell of boiling rice and fried spam in the air, my aching arms and legs refused the stiff jeans and long-sleeved shirt I wore without fail. For two summers, I worked for the multinational Del Monte on the island of Moloka'i, picking pineapples in fields baked by the equatorial sun and choked with a cloud of suffocating white powder that lined the undersides of the plant's silvery spikes. Walking between rows of pineapples behind a boom, a dozen of us twisted the ripe fruit off its stalk and with one motion snapped off the crown and heaved the pine onto the boom's conveyer belt, which carried it to a waiting truck. To compound our misery, the plant's needles necessitated heavy chaps worn over our jeans, extra sleeves pulled up to the elbows and anchored to our shirts with safety pins, wire mesh goggles to protect our eyes when reaching down into the thorny undergrowth, straw hats to shield the head and face, and heavy work boots to trample uneven ground and poisonous scorpions and centipedes. Some drew bandanas across their nose and mouth to filter the thick dust.

The sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959, 5, 196–7), in an essay on 'intellectual craftsmanship', recommended that scholars keep a daily journal

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of their activities and ideas. Those, he proposed, comprise files to spark the 'sociological imagination', which enables human comprehension of 'the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life'. After helping to fill twenty truckloads of pineapples on a good day, the only thought and energy I had was to get to bed. Even dinner seemed too large an obstacle on the way to the heavenly sack. I could not imagine how my fellow workers could pause to reflect upon their day's experiences, much less write poetry, paint landscapes, arrange flowers or stitch exquisite patterns onto cloth. I have seen seasoned men faint from the heat and exhaustion. Had I the energy to apprehend my condition in its wholeness, of self and society, biography and history, self and the world, as prescribed by Mills in a book published about the time of my pineapple days, I might have railed against a foreign corporation occupying native, Hawaiian lands and exploiting men and women of colour, young and old alike, whose rough hands produced fleshy, tropical fruit for gentle, civilized palates.

It was not unremitting, fortunately, my life of plantation labour. My youthful days, by contrast, were filled with opportunities to daydream about possibilities. I would die before my thirty-second year, I was sure, and thus I had to achieve my fame quickly. My mother and father were not quite so lucky. My father worked at the 'Aiea sugar mill and my mother cleaned the homes of rich, white people near Le'ahi (Diamond Head) well before they could complete their primary schooling. Their earnings gifted me the luxury to contemplate my condition and 'project', as some scholars are fond of saying. I recall lazy mornings and afternoons lying on my bed staring at the ceiling, discerning patterns formed by water and rust stains from the leaky tin-coated roof above. Most disturbing were the contours of a human body outlined by the sagging ceiling. One day the victim would fall through, I was convinced. Our house, distinguished only by its paint colour, stood in a line of houses built along the hillside by the Honolulu Plantation to specifications and building materials attentive to the needs of the tropics and above all, the requirements of economy.

I was ignorant of and hence ungrateful for the four-month great strike of 1909 in which some 7000 sugar workers from all major O'ahu plantations, including the one at 'Aiea, went on strike for higher wages and better work and living conditions. Instead of the 'pigstylike homes', one of the strike leaders demanded, workers deserved 'family cottages' for their children (Okihiro 1991, 46). Although the strikers returned to work without the slightest evidence of success, having endured mass evictions, harassment and intimidation, and the arrest and imprisonment of strike leaders and sympathizers under 'emergency measures', the following year the Bureau of Labor and Statistics urged and the planters adopted a new programme of paternalism designed to derail worker unrest by providing them with 'recreation amusement' and 'more comfortable and attractive quarters' (Beechert 1985, 192). Our regulation three-bedroom house, with an interior

kitchen, toilet, and shower and a yard large enough for vegetable plots and fruit trees, was a handiwork of that strike. I should have been appreciative but by the 1950s, the decade of my 'small kid time', I resented the roof that dripped, the termite-infested walls and floors, and the windows, which were too small to admit the cooling breezes that descended the Ko'olau slopes.

My lack of gratitude under paternalism was sharpened by my growing realization that the plantation's bosses lived apart from the workers' camp and their homes and yards were palatial and indulgent by comparison. I remember being awestruck when my grandfather took me to the manager's white house, which stood at the end of a long, winding driveway lined with stately palms and which rose two stories above well-manicured lawns and gardens. I flashed on stumbling upon the set of *Gone With the Wind*. My grandfather was a 'yard boy' at that estate, and I'm afraid I didn't much help him with his tasks, preferring instead to collect and eat the fallen mangoes on the lawn. I discovered, much to my delight, in the course of my many expeditions into forbidden territory, that workers commonly planted vegetables in the cane fields alongside the water ditches, making use of the plantation's resources for their needs. Although petty in the big picture, those instances of trespass, as members of the coarser class, were our delicious secret pleasure.

Doubtless, growing up on the 'Aiea plantation was the primal and paramount source of my education. The plantation shrouded my world behind a curtain of cane, which surrounded our camp, and it located my identity within its social hierarchy. The planters, I would subsequently learn, deliberately drew those limited horizons because they feared losing their workforce, the children of plantation workers, to upward and outward mobility. Their 'back-to-the-soil' scheme to keep laborers on the plantations by dampening aspirations for full equality was evidenced in public schools that promoted agriculture for boys and domestic 'sciences' for girls and in the counsel given to young people in 1930 by the University of Hawaii president: 'Do not count on education to do too much for you, do not take it too seriously. Do not expect a college degree, an A.B. or a Ph.D., to get you ahead unduly in this world' (Okihiro 1991, 144). That advice, we were told, was in keeping with our 'Americanization', which required us to stay in our place, as workers, gratefully.

Begun in 1835 by William Hooper, a native of Boston, Hawai'i's sugar plantations grew to dominate the life of the kingdom by occupying most of the best agricultural land, employing the largest share of the workforce, and controlling capital and its exchanges through an interlocking network of blood and business alliances. The core of that oligarchy descended from New England missionaries who strived to undermine the religious bases of Hawaiian society and culture, and from mercantilists who systematically exploited the islands' natural and human resources, including whales, sandalwood and Hawaiian skills as seamen (Fuchs 1961; Kent 1983).

Certain of Hawai'i's rulers joining in that pursuit of god and mammon to their immediate but not long-term advantage, many of the kingdom's subjects protested that unquiet revolution in petitions, mass movements, armed uprisings, and retreats to isolated enclaves where they continued their devotion to the ancestral land, waters and skies. (Osorio 2002; Silva 2004; McGregor 2007) The political theft of the kingdom was completed in 1893 by the force of arms, and the USA annexed Hawai'i five years later.

The plantation system, which predominated from the 1860s to the Second World War, lured to the islands Europeans, Africans, Latina/os, and Asians, like my grandparents, to work in the fields of cane and pineapple. Fundamental was its social hierarchy that ranked individuals as groups and allocated privileges on the basis of class but also race and ethnicity. Whites or 'Americans', we knew, constituted the structure's apex because of their 'virtues', while those who were not White remained below due to their 'inadequacies'. During my coming of age, I had Portuguese neighbours in our 'Japanese camp', but they were the exception from the rule that segregated Hawaiians from Chinese and so forth to pit one group against the other, and thereby depress wages and reduce the potential for class unity and action across colour and culture lines. And so we were schooled into believing that Japanese were superior to Okinawans, Chinese, and all other groups save Whites, and that the Portuguese were the butt of jokes because they were White but not quite. In fact, many Portuguese, drawn not from Portugal but the darker Azores and Madeiras off Africa's coast, served as lunas or field bosses having to mingle with the workers while serving as surrogates for their truly 'white', Anglo masters. Their marginal status inspired ridicule and sometimes envy and contempt from those at the top and bottom. The elite, of course, structured and determined those positions but they were also adhered to as well as resisted by the masses who did not install but might have had a stake in the system of social stratification.

Our predicament, C. Wright Mills proposes, is the trap of self and daily life that can easily occupy the totality of our reality and our need to rely upon that very experience to plot our escape from the personal and immediate. Reason, 'the advance guard in any field of learning', he contends, will allow us the possibility of progressing past that befuddlement by installing discipline and systematic thinking to give direction to our search for order, for meaning, 'to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time'. Further, 'scholarship is a choice of how to live as well as a choice of career' because quality work emanates from quality character (Mills 1959, 3–5, 205, 211, 223, 226). I was not precocious, alas, in deploying reason in the service of directing my existence because, in part, my colonized position and plantation education discouraged such soaring ambitions with the inertia of the mundane; and yet, in retrospect, that brand of 'mis-education' (Woodson 1933) in the service of plantation paternalism gave

shape to the content of my character, a contrariety and contempt for a 'colonial mentality' (Memmi 1967), as a child and now as a scholar.

In addition to shaping the person who I think I am, those plantation memories, like the ditches that directed water to sugar fields and in which I swam and played, structure and sustain my life's narrative and work. Some of those channels include a profound appreciation for and avoidance of a vocation of hard, manual labour, a deep distrust of and disdain for the ruling class and caste and institutions of their creation, a compulsion to infringe upon bounded estates, and an unalloyed and sometimes sentimental union with the oppressed and those consigned to the margins. Similar to the interplay between one's discrete recollections and complete life story, I am fond of searching for dialectical tensions, the relations of power, which reveal processes and forms of subjugation and exploitation and their resistances, however fleeting or ineffectual. Within the plantation economy, those positions and articulations of privilege included prominently class, race and ethnicity but also gender and age by which women and the young and elderly were commonly assigned to unskilled, poorly paid and seasonal labour. Those revelations loom large in my historical account and contemporary enacting of that script, selective and unfolding as they are. Further, my present purpose, the tracing of the threads of my life and life's work, and my contemporary condition predispose this version of self's engagement with history.

The antipode of Hawai'i, the islands of my birth, is Botswana, the landlocked nation of my intellectual birth. Although situated on the African continent, Botswana, at the time of my arrival there, was an island of black rule surrounded by white supremacist states – the renegade Rhodesia to its north, the client-state south-west Africa to its west, and apartheid South Africa to its east and south. In Botswana from 1969 to 1971 courtesy of the US war in south-east Asia, I had been allowed by my draft board to join the Peace Corps in 1968 when American troops surged to over half a million in Vietnam. Just a year before, some 300,000 marched in New York City against the war, and 100,000 attempted to shut down the war-making Pentagon in Washington, DC. I too opposed 'white boots' trampling over a 'yellow land', feeling a kinship with Vietnam's anti-colonial patriots, and I agonized over fleeing to free Canada, and then testified instead in Honolulu as a conscientious objector. I wondered what my father, a Second World War veteran and a Purple Heart recipient, thought about my war stance. I never asked; he rarely talked.

I was in Beaufort, South Carolina for Peace Corps training in 1968 when Richard Nixon captured the White House, when the National Organization for Women (NOW) protested women's objectification at the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, when the Vietnamese launched the Tet offensive that eventually culminated with their country's liberation, when the American Indian Movement (AIM) was founded, when some 10,000

Chicana/o high school students in Los Angeles organized a walk-out for educational equity, when Columbia University erupted in student protest over the Vietnam war and plans to expand the campus into Harlem, when students of colour, including African, Asian, and Native Americans and Latina/os formed the Third World Liberation Front at San Francisco State College to demand ethnic studies, and when a white man assassinated Martin Luther King, Jr. The world around me was in flames although I hardly knew it. All of those fragments would later find their spot within the mosaic that is now the telling of my life's story.

In Beaufort on St Helena Island, Penn Center was begun by missionaries in 1862 to educate enslaved Sea Islanders and about a hundred years later was famous in the civil rights movement as the eye of the storm where many of the South's freedom fighters, including Martin Luther King, Jr and members of his Southern Christian Leadership Conference, rested and plotted ungentle strategies in non-violence. I still shiver at the remembrance of white men in pick-up trucks with rifles displayed prominently in their rear windows, cruising as if hunting for vermin in the Center's vicinity. I was there because the Peace Corps held a peculiar idea, no doubt inspired by racialized thinking, that its volunteers destined for Africa should live among rural, African Americans for 'sensitivity' training. The Corps might advance the aggressive interests of US global supremacy but its regulars mustn't offend in the slightest. The uplift and benevolent assimilation of 'our little red, brown, yellow, and black brothers' has a long and sordid history in US expansion and empire.

I can still sense the shock of arrival when we had to find our way to the homes of our host families. Given only their names, we had to rely upon our ingenuity and daring to venture out in that alien land that was rural South Carolina, amidst swamps and trees drooping Spanish moss. Ghosts peopled the countryside. Somehow I managed to find the Singletons, African American sharecroppers, whose wooden house stood on stilts above the marshy ground. The blood rushes to my cheeks in discomfiture to this day as I recall seeing a framed diploma on the wall, and asking from which university their child had graduated. Fresh from UCLA's history graduate programme, I had forgotten that for these children, mired in poverty, completing high school was a signal accomplishment worthy of display. I was unmindful of my roots, narcotized as I was by plantation paternalism and western civilization and culture. I was proud to have received an 'A' in my college 'Art Appreciation' course, reputedly the toughest general education class. Needless to say, 'art', called 'classical', involved only European visual and musical achievements since the ancient Greeks. I had to unlearn the parochial imperiousness of my mis-education.

Teaching at a local African American high school, like living with the Singletons, helped to right my balance. The students in my biology class were wonderfully bright, curious and expectant; it was, after all, a season of

youth. But the reality of small budgets and poorly equipped classrooms forced me to draw my own charts and diagrams and students had to share microscopes that hardly worked. Discovering single-celled life in pond water under those conditions was particularly challenging; and indelibly etched in my mind is the sight of a young man walking to school in the morning chill, his lanky figure and misty breath bathed in golden sunshine, wearing much too large and worn leather shoes. His 'kicks' were not a fashion statement but a requirement of necessity. From my education in Hawai'i, I came to recognize those students and the Singletons as 'my' people, and the elites and their social formations, gun-toting racists and inferior, 'colored' schools as my 'other'. Those understandings and commitments were my initial provocation and they continue to animate and direct my personal and intellectual labours.

After a brief rest stop in Johannesburg's airport where the only notable act of defiance I mustered was to urinate in the 'Whites Only' restroom, Japanese having been granted by the apartheid regime 'Honorary White' status because of the import of Japan's trade, I flew into Gaborone, Botswana's capital. Independent since 30 September 1966, Botswana escaped the clutches of its white supremacist neighbour to the south as one of the British High Commission Territories, which included the Bechuanaland Protectorate (Botswana), Basutoland (Lesotho), and Swaziland. Seretse Khama, married to a white, British woman, was elected president of that largely flat and arid country dominated by the expanding Kalahari Desert.

Most of Botswana's people, Bantu-speakers (Batswana), had migrated from the south during the nineteenth century, overwhelming bands of San, mainly gatherers and hunters, and Kgalagadi, primarily pastoralists. The land was marginally suited for the large-scale agricultural economies and settlements from whence the migrants came, and many of them adapted to the new environment as gatherers, hunters and pastoralists organized in small, mobile groups much like the Kgalagadi. Over the course of the century, the newcomers coalesced into large towns under a single ruler (*kgosi*), forming nations (*merafe*) that were subsumed by the British under the Bechuanaland Protectorate in 1885. The nations, diminished to 'tribes' by the colonizers, and their capitals, reduced to 'villages' consisting of aggregations of dozens of households and lineages (*makgotla*), remained distinctive features of the Protectorate. I was stationed just west of Gaborone along the Kalahari's fringes among the Bakwena in their capital, Molepolole, where for three years I taught the science and health classes at Kgosi Kgari Sechele II Secondary School.

Having the privilege of working with children who would some day form the leaders of this young, black-ruled nation was exhilarating. At the same time, that life of learning moved to the hourly ringing of the school bell and its five-day work week, and the students all wore neatly pressed uniforms to attend a school physically separated from the places in which they lived.

Further, most of the 'expatriates' who taught there occupied the rows of government-designed, rectangular houses on the fenced-off school compound. Apart from contact with their students and servants who cleaned, washed and cooked for them, 'expatriate' teachers circled the familiar and approached the edges but rarely leaped full-bodied into Setswana society. Despite deliberately avoiding much of the excesses of 'expatriate' comity and socializing mainly with Batswana in the 'village', I only appreciated the extent of my alienation from the land and people around me when I removed myself physically and psychologically from the school grounds to live in the oldest and most venerable of Molepolole's sections (*metse*), Ntloedibe.

There for a year in 1975, I rose and retired to the sun, and although somewhat immune to the changing wet and dry, hot and cold seasons, I fell into a rhythm at odds with the clock and work-week culture, which is designed to be oblivious to the environment and its movements. The sound of roosters crowing and dogs barking, the clanking of cattle bells and bleating of goats and sheep, and far off voices in the night now comprised my reality. The early morning lines of women and girls, water buckets on their heads, balancing their way along trails homeward bound, and young boys steering their herds of animals, including cattle with impossibly long horns, to boreholes and then distant pastures signalled the start of my days. The sun's heat warmed in the winter and stifled in the summer, and the evening's clarity and its unfamiliar skies alerted me to my location in the southern hemisphere. Hard to describe, the temporal and spatial reorientations in my body and mind were pervasive and profound nonetheless, and they gradually impressed upon me the distance between the version of history I was taught to write in the USA and the variant I was beginning to sense in Botswana. Grasping those ephemeral experiential truths, however, required both an unlearning and a cultivation.

'Tell me about the Bakwena past (*ditsho*)', I began my meetings with the elders in my attempt at historical recovery. I recall well those tortuous hours, day after day at the kgosi's *kgotla* (meeting place). Painful they were because these learned men and a few women appeared to know very little about the nation's history. There was no master narrative, no sweeping account of origins and destinies, no king lists, battles waged, lands conquered and lost, technological and economic advances. From my readings of nineteenth-century European travellers and twentieth-century anthropologists, I secretly and arrogantly thought, I knew far more of the Bakwena past than these oral historians of the nation. After a particularly excruciating session, I blurted out in desperation, 'Okay, tell me something about yourself, your genealogy'.

That patronizing and ignorant, as it turned out, request unleashed a torrent of insights into the nature of self and society, I believe, and history itself. Tutored as I was in the notion of 'objective' history, my lead and

vague question into the 'Bakwena past' was my attempt not to colour or predispose my informants' answers. The problem, as I came to learn, was that history or *ditsho* is a very personal account and possession, and the 'nation', the 'Bakwena', a loosely structured and nebulous body. In fact, both history and the nation were collections of diverse and oftentimes divergent peoples and pasts, intersecting and separating in different moments and places. All that became clear when the elders traced their lineages to their beginnings, frequently to non-Bakwena, the times and paths of their migrations, and their incorporation into the Bakwena nation. History was not some distant, objective construct, my Bakwena tutors taught me; rather, *ditsho* helps to apprehend the human condition, of self and society, biography and history, self and the world. The past was all very immediate and very personal, but also broadly capacious and deep.

After that history lesson, things fell into place. I came to understand why the first Bakwena settled in temporary shelters, why gathering, hunting and herding occupied their labours, and why they organized themselves into small, kinship bands, contrary to the European accounts of large, permanent Batswana towns circled by agricultural fields and cattle posts. I discovered that at least since the late eighteenth century, non-Bakwena migrants predominated within the Bakwena nation, which was a federation of diverse ethnicities and not a 'tribe' of kin groups as was so powerfully described by structural-functionalist anthropologists; and despite social stratifications installed as unchanging 'customary law' and 'tradition' by white colonialists, I found instances in which juniors escaped the domination of seniors, women, men, servants, masters, and I realized that birth, class, gender and 'race' were not fixed categories but were constantly contested and struggled over, giving history and individual lives their dynamic.

My new understanding of the Bakwena social formation required a quieting of my academic training and a listening to the voices of history's subjects and agents. It also, I firmly believe, involved a recalibration of body and mind to the spatial and temporal natures of the land and its biotic communities, including humans and all other life forms. The imagination, C. Wright Mills (1959, 205) maintains in his commentary on intellectual work, sets the scientist apart from the technician, and requires discipline and systematic reflection and thinking beyond the collection and marshalling of empirical evidence, a research procedure 'thin and uninteresting'. That imagination, I contend, while susceptible to a deliberate crafting, can also involve the happenstance of chance and opportunities seized, the tireless and exhaustive search for evidence, and the consideration, as Mills outlines, of extremes, inversions, relationships and comparisons. Above all, imagination, I hold, begins with a centred self and the ability to vacate that self for the place, time and circumstance of the other.

That retreat and advance, that choice of position, Raymond Williams points out, involves a commitment and affiliation, an identity of one with

the other. Authors and their texts are not autonomous entities but exist within particular places and times, as individuals within society. Authors, all of us, occupy social places, and our texts, our lives take social forms and meanings. In that sense, all writing and lives make claims and express implicitly or explicitly points of view. They bear the mark of affiliation. However, genuinely committed writing and living arise from the author's 'whole being' and hence, 'necessarily, his real social existence'. As such, writing is self-composition and a creation that can offer a new articulation, a new formation insofar as writers – historical agents – and their scripts interact (Williams 1977, 192–8, 199–205, 211–12; see McAdams 2006). Although Williams is concerned with the literal author and 'his' writings, conventions, forms and language, I extend his analysis to all humans who write and read their lives in conversation with society; and I subscribe to his thesis of political commitment and writing, Mills's scholarship as life and career, which wells from one's whole being and social existence.

The American writer Annie Dillard once described her memoir as moving 'from the interior landscape – one brain's own idiosyncratic topography – to the American landscape, the vast setting of our common history', and Toni Morrison explained that imagination allows her to fill the absences that void the 'interior life' of her African American narrators (Zinsser 1987, 56, 111–12). In fashioning this brief 'academic autobiography', I acknowledge that I am validating, exposing and performing my crafted self and my scholarly work. Such are the barren and fecund natures of the memoir form.

Moreover, I have chosen to construct my account around the polarities and unions of space and time. Antipodal and homologous, Hawai'i, the place of my birth, are islands while Botswana, the place of my intellectual birth, although landlocked in the midst of a vast continent was during my time there a black-ruled island circled by white supremacist seas. Refusing plantation and Eurocentric mis-education was crucial to my development as a person and scholar to locate myself within my place and time, biography and history, self and the world. Multiply constituted by race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and nation, the self, whether in Hawai'i's plantations or Botswana's societies, was and is a work in progress. The twin sources of my island education continue to lend meaning to my invented self and my intellectual labors to advance the causes of my commitments 'to make a difference in the quality of [. . .] life in our [space and] time'.

Notes on contributor

Gary Y. Okihiro is a professor of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University. He is the author of nine books, most recently, *Island World: A History of Hawai'i and the United States* (2008). He received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Studies Association.

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