

Applied / Engaged / Activist / (ultimately) *Kuleana* Anthropology in the Classroom and Beyond – An Interview with Professor Christine Yano

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Abstract

Christine Yano has recently retired as Professor of Anthropology at the University of Hawaii. She has conducted research on Japan and Japanese Americans with a focus on popular culture. At the University of Hawaii, she taught a course called 'Applied/ Engaged/Activist (ultimately) *Kuleana* Anthropology'. This is predicated upon the idea that we need not choose between scholarship on the one hand, and community engagement on the other, and it encourages consideration for how anthropologists can nurture lasting relationships with those whom they work with. In this interview, the concept of '*Kuleana*' driven anthropology is introduced and Christine unpacks the realities of publishing with students, decolonizing the curriculum, sparking student interest, and building trust in the classroom.

Introduction

'*Kuleana*' is a Hawaiian word which alludes to responsibility and privilege. It is predicated upon the idea that individuals hold responsibility and privilege to consider, care for and ultimately protect the land and/or community to which they belong or are part of. In this interview Christine relates the meaning behind the concept of '*Kuleana*' to her teaching practices, exploring the value of integrating both the teaching of Anthropology and the commitment driven concept of *Kuleana*.

One way in which we 'engage Anthropology' is through the social relations we develop during the teaching process (Shah, 2008). From the way we relate to our students, our discussions in class and the readings that are set – this ultimately affects the way in which one goes onto act in the world (Ibid). Shah (2008) has stipulated that no matter how much we may want to maintain a divide between mainstream anthropology and applied anthropology, our role as academics vs our role as activists, this divide is challenged as we reflect and analyse the processes that occur within our classrooms. In the outline for her '*Kuleana* Anthropology' module Christine states in the syllabus that in *Kuleana* anthropology, we take the responsibility of what we do and who we do it with. She further clarifies that this is not to say that beyond this anthropology does not do this, but by placing *Kuleana* as the essential framework, we place community at the heart of our endeavours and their outcomes, meaning we are fully engaged and committed participants in the field.

I first came across Christine's work after reviewing her book '*Straight A's Asian American Students in their own words*' for *Anthropology in Action*. In 2014 Christine was a visiting Professor at The University of Harvard where she introduced her novel course 'Asian American representations and realities' which subsequently led to the publication of the aforementioned book. The course involved, discussion in various creative forms which become apparent even through the way the book is written. Drawn to the way Christine engaged with a collective of students in such a short space of time, later penning a book which would resonate with individuals such as myself when topics such as home, the diaspora and the implications diasporic belonging has on upbringing, I contacted Christine proposing an interview. I was interested in her creative modes of engagement and dissemination and our initial exchange of emails led to her sharing the Syllabus for her module *Kuleana* Anthropology which she felt resonated with her previous teaching practices which I wanted to discuss. As a PhD student and teaching assistant for many introductory Anthropology courses at the University of Durham, the overarching theme of *Kuleana* Anthropology seemed to fit well.

The Kuleana Anthropology module is a required module for the MA in Applied Cultural Anthropology. However, the course is a shared course and also open to undergraduate students. The course contains a compulsory field-based component where students must conduct a fieldwork project whereby they engage actively with a community based organization. By the end of the course students should be able to discuss relevant issues surrounding kuleana anthropology and also be able to identify its ethical-decision-making framework. Furthermore, Christine states in her module syllabus outcomes that as a result of taking this module students should be able to define 'ways by which kuleana-based engagement is one means of decolonizing the discipline of anthropology itself.'

The following interview took place online via Microsoft teams on 24th July 2023.

Interview

Karamampas (2023) argues that we cannot talk of a decolonial anthropology which is not engaged and acknowledges that although others (Low and Merry, 2010) have posited that anthropology is by definition engaged there are various degrees of engagement. Christine, you address this yourself in your course and distinguish between applied, engaged and Kuleana Anthropology. Why are these distinctions important to consider especially when teaching Anthropology and can you start by telling us more about the term Kuleana?

Kuleana is a Hawaiian word. Whenever we try to translate our translations are never perfect. One translation is responsibility. Kuleana is always about ties. It's about ties between a person and a community and blending the two - ensuring the tie is at the forefront. It is about what we do, who we are and how we think about what we're doing. As long as you have applied anthropology it still sounds like you're painting something over- like you're painting over a coat of paint. I don't mean to mischaracterise it because many people who give themselves the rubric of applied anthropologist are extremely committed and sincere in what they do, and I don't want to take that away from them. My purpose is about trying to distinguish between these labels even if these practices are overlapping. If I am at the University of Hawaii it is my responsibility to commit to living here and recognise the indigenous concepts I am surrounded by. It might be considered co-optation; but to try to learn from the indigenous around me and as an anthropologist I feel it is really important that we do that.

Int: In your teaching how do you communicate these distinctions to your students. Would you argue anthropology by definition is engaged... especially when teaching first year students who are new to the discipline- what approach do you take / how do you communicate these ideas?

It's very difficult especially if you are talking about first year students or an introductory class because the typical model of teaching is students are there to receive wisdom. To turn that model on its head I think is really important, for students to understand wisdom comes from many sources and that there are many types of wisdoms. We learn in all directions- it's a multidirectional kind of learning. All of the classes I teach are discussion based, with a decentred hierarchy. Although, it's a bit of fakery because power rests in the hand of the instructor... you're going to give the grades and so forth. I still think there is a kind of empowerment we can give our students. I think we still have to hold a certain element of evaluation as the instructor. I learn from my students as well. It's not solely in the hands of the instructor and the rest of the students. To inculcate that kind of confidence, that I have something worth sharing with others and I can be open to growing through this co-sharing is important. For example, students take responsibility with the ways discussion goes in class, we can rotate leadership. There are various kinds of ways we can inculcate Kuleana or shared responsibility or a community that is created in the classroom. A community that is built upon trust and responsibility I think is important in introductory classes and graduate level classes. It's not impossible.

The classroom has been referenced as a space where systematic hierarchies and inequalities are challenged as opposed to being reproduced (Brodkin et al., 2011). Christine you describe Kuleana anthropology as values-driven and ethically circumspect, can you expand on how this might play out in the classroom?

I think whenever you're dealing with humans there's always uncertainty involved. As anthropologists the reason we choose anthropology is often because we're ok with uncertainty, the chaos. The Kuleana course involves a fieldwork project where establishing relationships with a community or group is key. A good majority of the students will quote 'fail.' They'll say 'I wanted to do this but they didn't let me.' In the latter part of the course we talk a lot about the students field experiences. Our collective goal was to rethink what the students thought of as failure, to reframe interaction, endeavours. Perhaps this element of Kuleana was really about the students

understanding themselves better and their own expectations. We reframe 'failure' in ways that students could learn from the experience and I think if we can help students understand themselves better I consider that a huge classroom success. I tell them over and over no one is obligated to give you an interview... to give you anything. Anything they agree to do, choose to do, whether it's showing you a diary or speaking to you- you have to be grateful- and that establishes a sense of responsibility. Those are lessons too. The humility of the anthropological endeavour should absolutely be part of what you're teaching.

Larsen et al (2022) have described engagement as entailing the co-construction of shared spaces and collective process, where more participatory practices and relationships can flourish and enables multiple forms of co-creation - replacing the individual anthropologist working alone instead with collective forms of knowledge production. Christine, I'd say your book is a perfect example of this. 'Straight A's Asian American students in their own words' was published as a result of the course you ran as visiting professor at Harvard. You state "The aim of this book is rather straight forward and delimited: give voice to the experiences of Asian American undergraduate students at an elite institution (...) This is not a classic ethnography of Asian American undergraduates at Harvard university- such an approach situates those students firmly within the paradigm of research framing them as objects of study from which we may draw timely conclusions." Could you talk a little more about this teaching project?

When I was invited to be a visiting professor at Harvard, in a normal academic sense if you're invited to somewhere like Harvard the idea is you'll use that time productively... but I didn't have an agenda. In teaching this class, this book was a result of two semesters of engagement. From the get-go I thought wouldn't it be great if I could help this bunch of talented students at Harvard, to tell their stories. I started the class with that in mind. I think I told them at the beginning we're going to go through this semester in a somewhat traditional way, but if you choose in the following semester you can be part of a collective; to write up stories, share stories and if possible we might try to have this published as a book.

Then, here is where the values of decolonisation and structures of academia can clash. I had this idea, and when I proposed it to Duke University Press, they said well we don't usually publish student stories but I went about what I was doing anyway but in some ways I thought is this going to be an orphan project. Anyway, when it came to the point where I had completed the manuscript, I was just about to send it to another press, I remembered the original conversation. First it was an idea and now I had a manuscript. The editor got back to me the next day and said I love it lets do it. Part of this is down to such an editor who is willing to think outside the box. For them to say I like this lets do it. It takes that. What I am trying to do is not affirm to the structures of academia. The process of decolonisation, Kuleana or not will come upon some of the stumbling blocks of academic hierarchies. The doing in itself was very moving for students – they never thought their experiences would be of value in the classroom- the idea that something their mother said would be of value in the classroom.

Its important to honour your students no matter what... Shouldn't that be the principle of Anthropology? That's why we're in it? I think that that should be our principle. It is not a goody too shoes approach to recognise the validity of different peoples and their histories and their inter connections whether they be students/ research subjects if you want to call them- it's the same principle – whoever you interact with. So that histories count – histories of violence count. Also, we have to go into situations, for example teaching, maybe with structures in mind, and I did, but always just be open to thinking- what are they (students) asking me? Who are they? What are they beginning me to do? In this case it was a chapter on mental health. That's what is important to them. That to me is Anthropology's lesson, to listen well and then to act upon it.

Thank you, Christine. we very briefly touched on ideas around decolonisation and indeed, it has been argued that calls to decolonize the curriculum are often (mis)interpreted as calls to abandon and replace the classics with 'non-Western' scholars (Rasch, 2022). Consequently, some anthropologists (Hage, 2017) have vigorously defended the 'forefathers' of the discipline, insisting that despite their flaws they are 'good to think with' (Mogstad and Tse, 2018). Mogstad and Tse (2018) advocate for certain texts to be considered with an adequate sense of historical awareness as well as emphasising the importance of avoiding romanticizing 'non-Western' or post/ de/ anticolonial thinkers. How do you navigate the tension between these arguments when creating your reading lists and selecting the resources you choose to draw on when teaching introductory courses? For example, When you have a broad first year course – for introducing the whole of social anthropology to first year students. How can we be creative with the resources we expose students and balance this against the pressure of what 'needs' to be taught?

When I have taught introductory courses, my main goal is not to leave students with a bunch of factoids. My main goal is to excite, to stimulate creative thoughts. It is an opportunity spark ideas. That's my main goal. If after the course, they go 'Malinowski who?' I forgive them. If they can get excited about some of those ideas that

drove Anthropology, to me that's the main goal. I make it so I say- here's the facts you need, we can do a quick quiz on that, but then what I'm more concerned with is the essays you write based on these ideas. If my goal is to spark the interests of students, then my approach to introductory courses is to give them a conduit to it – a personal conduit. So, for example, the last time taught 'Intro to Cultural Anthropology' our basic bread and butter course- I did the whole of Anthropology through food. Every important concept can be gotten at through food. It was a large lecture class of seventy and I'd divide them up into teams, they could come up with their own food name of teams. We had competitions every week and student's bringing in something based on food and an Anthropological concept. Also, students always love guest speakers. Over the course of the semester I had four or five. I asked a number of them to bring/cook food- something that was processual. Food is such a common denominator. Think of kinship and food- how could it not be connected? So, I use food as my entre to student's imagination. Also, we analysed menus- I had them go out and analyse menus—so there were field components. Ultimately with this, I say let your imagination go wild. Go through your Introductory cultural Anthropology book- you see all those concepts and I bet you can relate every one of them to food.

Another thing if we're talking about pedagogy is recognising the ways people express themselves Some may be more reticent. I found that by giving different ways of expressing themselves, sometimes by writing, sometimes by quick writes. When we discuss afterwards if someone isn't comfortable just talking they can always read what they wrote. One of the keys of what we're talking about as well is learning to listen- in a very wholeheartedly way- not just the times you close your mouth and shut up but to really actively listen, I mean that's a cliché now, it's a tough thing- it's a skill that you can develop, but to know when your silence in effect is really important. If I'm thinking of the classroom you might consider as an assignment having students keep a listening diary- have them write down times they have listened, the quality of the listening what they have learned from listening but the idea of a listening diary might be really interesting. To me part of decolonising is it is only letting yourself being open to the unexpected. To not pre-ordain what is supposed to come out of this – but to see what happens and then try to make sense of it in some way. All of what you're talking about- it all begins and ends with values. If we have a strong sense of our values and we want to uphold the integrity of people around us and we hold onto those values then a lot of things fall into line and you just have to be clear of what your values are, what you're doing.

My last question, which perhaps brings together a lot of what we have spoken about is regarding the argument that whilst on the one hand there is the so called speed of the neoliberal university (Vostal, 2016) and this push for impact – there has been this talk and advocacy for slow ethnography/ slow research (Grandia, 2015). Arguably the pressure of 'speed' might compromise how comfortable people feel using alternative methods, collaboration or a more participatory approach. Should we be trying to incorporate slowness into our teaching and research? Is slowness in teaching important? How might we incorporate a sense of slowness in our teaching especially when thinking about Kuleana Anthropology? How do you feel about these ideas around slowness- is it something we should be considering or is it entirely something else we should be thinking about?

I think what you can try to communicate to students in the classroom is anthropology is about relationships. Relationships sometimes are built on speed- you might quickly fall in love! You might quickly build relationships, you might not. Often times, relationships are based up on trust. Trust isn't something that happens like that- trust is time honoured. It has to be based in time and not be sped up- you can try all you will. The kind of trust that we hope to engage in is one that we hope to be long standing. When you think about that long standing kind of relationship, it is long standing which indicates a kind of slowness, but I think the idea is to respect that and understand why that is important.

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