



Learning Da Kine: A Filmmaker Tackles Local Culture and Pidgin

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When Professor Kanalu Young and I first met, we were serving together as panelists for a media competition, judging among several grant proposals as to which would make the best films about the experiences of Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders. Though the two of us come from very different backgrounds—I was born and raised Jewish in Des Moines, Iowa and lived for over thirty years on the East Coast of the United States; Kanalu grew up Hawaiian/Chinese/Caucasian in Hawai'i, where he has lived all his life—we found that we had complementary responses to the proposals we read. After serving on the panel, we discussed the possibility of Kanalu—a tenured professor of Hawaiian Studies with a PhD in history—and me—a documentary filmmaker of films about American culture and history—creating together a film about Hawai'i. We did not know what its focus would be, but we knew that examination of culture in Hawai'i would be a part of it.

Though we proposed and rejected various ideas, we eventually began discussing language. Our early research led us to examine Hawaiian language and its rebirth. In fact, though I had returned to living in Boston after a year's sabbatical in Hawai'i, I returned to Hawai'i to spend a few weeks immersing myself in the subject.

On my final day in town, I met with Kanalu to discuss my research. After he listened to me patiently, occasionally interjecting comments and critiques, he sat back in his chair, took a breath, and said, “You know I think we should consider Pidgin. Hawaiian language is very interesting, but really, without Pidgin, I would cease to be whole.”

Kanalu speaks the King's English and is also fluent in Hawaiian. I had heard him speak Pidgin perhaps once or twice, and I had no idea he felt that Pidgin was central to his identity. I am not certain that he, himself, had verbalized this thought before. But once the words were out of his mouth, he felt, and I experienced, that there was something powerful in his statement. Inspired by that single sentence alone, I flew back to Boston, determined to find a film about this subject that I'd barely noticed before.

I left Boston to live in Hawai'i in the fall of 2003. Kanalu and I received production funding from Pacific Islanders in Communications and began in earnest the research and discussion for our film about Pidgin and local culture. Through the halls of the university, in working-class neighborhoods of Honolulu, and at beaches, parks, weddings, and funerals, we have found Pidgin everywhere. We find that it unites—the simplest raise of the eyebrows becomes a way to assert identity and establish camaraderie—and also divides—rapid-fire Pidgin spoken under the breath can be a sure way to exclude others. It also measures authenticity—“da bugga ok”—and angers educators, and it makes some people laugh and cry while others are repelled by it. Through it all, Pidgin and the local culture that springs from it define something unique about Hawai'i.

It is that uniqueness—the intangible spirit, the combination of tough core and gentle soul—that largely makes Hawai'i Hawai'i and that guarantees that the islands will never become just another state in the United States.

Through Pidgin, we are chronicling the essence of local life in our film.

Why make a film about Pidgin? That is a question asked by my friend Marv, a transplant from New Jersey, who has been living on O‘ahu for at least fifteen years. To paraphrase Marv, Pidgin is “not a real language. It’s broken English. The people who use it sound stupid and uneducated. It’ll get them nowhere. Plain and simple. Nothing to discuss. How can you do a film about it? There’s nothing there.”

There’s nothing there.

In one way or another, the question: “Why make a film about Pidgin?” has been the guiding force for Kanalu and me from the beginning. For me as the outsider, the question was how to understand what was in front of me. In Hawai‘i, I often felt as if I had left the United States and landed in a foreign country, albeit a country where English was the mother tongue—more or less. As a Midwesterner, I felt at home with Hawai‘i’s sense of time, with a culture founded on people-to-people contact, and with a way of living that valued listening above orating. And yet, I found Hawai‘i novel and, in many ways, puzzling. In other places I have lived—Boston, for example—I’ve been able to latch onto something familiar and to use that as my base for understanding. In Hawai‘i, I did not know where to begin. I sat in on courses at the university and thought about studying a language—as I’d done when I lived in Israel—as a way to begin to unlock local culture. But with only James Michener’s *Hawaii* and Lili‘uokalani’s *Hawai‘i’s Story by Hawai‘i’s Queen* as background, I didn’t know which language would open Hawai‘i to me. Hawaiian? Chinese? Japanese? (I hadn’t begun to consider Tagalog, and in my early days here, I’d never even heard of Ilocano.) Who were the people I saw in front of me? What were their backgrounds? What were their stories?

The professor in one of my classes was Chinese, a friend in my art class was Filipina, and my law school hula hālau contained a mix—Hawaiian, Portuguese, Chomorran, Korean. In my hālau, I was classed, accurately, as a “special needs” hula dancer and assigned a more experienced dancer as a tutor. Sherry, my wonderful and very patient tutor who took time out of a busy schedule as a first year law student to work with me, was from Saipan, a place so unfamiliar to me that I heard it as “Japan” when she first told me. In being able to distinguish among people of Asian or Pacific Island ancestry, I was a babe in the woods. Everyone, it seemed

to me, had shared stories and frames of reference that were completely new to me. Hawai‘i seemed a cultural maze, and I had little clue about how to sort it out. Where did one begin with such a dazzling array of people, languages, cultures, and food?

As a young college student, I had traveled from the Midwest to visit my then-boyfriend (now husband of thirty-eight years) in New York City. I well remember being eighteen years old, walking hand-in-hand down New York’s streets, looking up at the huge skyscrapers and down at the mix of hurried, make-no-eye-contact people, and being astonished. I could only look and listen and respond to the surface of things. I had no idea how I could ever begin to penetrate such a city, overwhelming to me on a grand scale.

My response to Hawai‘i mimicked my New York experience. Hawai‘i did not intimidate in the same way physically—the sizes, shapes, and colors of plants were dazzling and inviting—but the social landscape was just as powerfully jaw-dropping as the buildings of New York. There seemed to be no one key to unlock Hawai‘i, as the French I learned in college, for example, worked somewhat to unlock France’s people and culture. Not knowing where to begin, I grabbed what came my way. I joined the halau at the law school. I took part in an informal, drop-in Hawaiian language class at Barnes and Noble, where grammar and sentence structure continued to elude me, but legends, place names, and ways of knowing the world embedded in Hawaiian began to make sense. I gravitated to events that began to fill in the picture such as performances by the group Olomana, the Talkstory Conference, reenactments of the Queen’s life by Nalani Olds, staged before a grateful and strongly moved audience at the Waikiki Public Library, non-stop watching of the Merrie Monarch Festival, ethnic festivals at Kapiolani Park, and anything else that caught my eye. Cultural immersion often ordered my day.

The lilt of Hawai‘i English, which my then ninth grade daughter began to acquire and the kindnesses of strangers, to adapt a line from Tennessee Williams, who would offer me fifty cents for parking rather than exchange my dollar for their four quarters. They were new experiences to me—new ways of interacting with people. In Boston (and even more so in New York, which I frequently visited and learned not to fear overly), you learn not to make conversation with strangers. In Hawai‘i, strangers waited for me to change lanes! The fact that in conversations people would ask where I was from

and, occasionally, my ethnicity, but never inquired about my line of work or the name of my college, astounded me. I’d just lived through the process of my son’s applying to college from Cambridge, Massachusetts. Every conversation I’d had for a year with parents of his peers seemed to be filled with references to elite colleges as a not-so-coded way of gauging our children’s grades and SAT scores. In my encounters in Hawai‘i’s “local culture” open classroom, however, that topic hardly seemed to matter.

Reading the morning paper also gave me a window into Hawai‘i. Within my first week here, I’d acquired the words “yohana,” “keiki,” “kupuna,” “pono,” “kuleana.” I used a Hawaiian language dictionary to read the paper. But just by reading the usual fare of daily life, a whole new world—of Hawaiian culture, the primacy of family life, and the importance of being humble and living with sensitivity—replaced the world I’d known of status, credentials, public recognition, and being self-made. New ideas and ways of thinking, such as Hawaiian culture and Buddhism, did not fit with anything I was accustomed to, and they began to offer new, alternative ways of understanding.

I remember once in Boston helping a Japanese journalist friend write a grant application in English. She and I would discuss ideas for her proposal, which she would jot down in English to translate later into Japanese, and later still to translate back into English. I asked her why she didn’t just write in Japanese in the first place to make the process speedier. She replied that our conversations represented an American way of thinking. To write a proposal that reflected her ideas, she needed to translate her thoughts into a Japanese way of thinking. She needed my help not to understand the language but to understand the thinking behind the language.

I don’t remember when I first heard Pidgin or became aware of it. It seeped in without my being aware of it—a bit like bird song in Hawai‘i, or the sound of ukuleles—and soon it seemed to be everywhere.

Like my own family’s home language of Yiddish, Pidgin is a fusion language, made up of words and phrases that invoke a shared past. When people speak Pidgin, the language brings them home.

But Pidgin is not spoken in every home, and the message about Pidgin that speakers hear and internalize is that Pidgin is bad English. “Don’t speak bad English,” many of my friends remember being told. My friend, Kent Sakoda, co-author of a book called *Pidgin Grammar*, teaches a course

at the University of Hawai‘i called “Pidgin and Creole English in Hawai‘i.” He asks his students to interview a university friend who speaks Pidgin. Those proud Pidgin speakers always seem to report that Pidgin is not a proper language and that people who speak Pidgin sound “stupid.”

Kanalu and I have found the same self-censorship to be true. Time and again, we pre-interview someone for the film who speaks Pidgin. We hear their stories and learn of their profound fondness for Pidgin, of their sense that Pidgin connects multiple generations and works as a language of the heart. But when we ask if we can film them talking story in Pidgin, the answer is no. “Shame, brah.” It’s one thing to speak Pidgin with friends or even with researchers. It is something else to commit yourself to a conversation in Pidgin captured for all time on film.

“Shame, brah.”

So how do you make a film about Pidgin if no one will appear on screen speaking the language? Furthermore, how do you frame the debate about Pidgin if critics of the language—those people who refuse to even call it a language—also refuse to appear on screen? What we have discovered in the making of our film is that, if we want the chance to capture spoken Pidgin, we can say that we are making a film about local culture. Then, sometimes, people relax and let us film. Interestingly because nearly every school child in Hawai‘i is taught to use his and her best English in public, even people proud of speaking Pidgin will switch to English as soon as they see a camera and microphone. Those scenes we have been able to capture in Pidgin have come about either because someone is so engaged in an activity that he or she doesn’t notice being filmed or people are so certain that they speak English properly that they don’t mind “kicking back and busting out the Pidgin.”

Kanalu arranged the first scene we filmed, a reunion of friends from his Pākī Park neighborhood. Though he had run into some of these friends from time to time, he had not seen others since childhood. He wanted to reassemble his fifty-something buddies in the place where they had become a cohesive group.

But there was a second, more urgent reason for assembling this group and filming this scene. At age fifteen (more than thirty-five years ago), while swimming with some of these friends at Cromwell’s Beach, Kanalu had a diving accident that left him quadriplegic. His friends, then merely

fourteen or fifteen years of age, initially mistook his failure to emerge from the water as the game *ma-ke* (Hawaiian for “dead”) man. Not knowing what to do, they had acted on instinct and out of great fear. Miraculously, they saved his life.

Kanalu felt that he had never adequately thanked those friends. His accident, and the anger and pain that followed, separated him from his friends and their shared past. The Pākī Park boys were just beginning to play basketball. Kanalu, confined to a wheelchair, could not bear to watch his pals doing what he longed to do. They, in turn, no longer knew how to talk to him. So he stayed away, finished high school, graduated from college, and eventually earned a PhD in history. His life took a direction far away from Pākī Park. He got a job teaching Hawaiian Studies at the university.

Now in his fifties, Kanalu wanted to thank those friends from his past. As he saw it, the best way to do that was to take them back to Pākī Park and to speak Pidgin.

Though the scene unfolded more slowly than we had both imagined—turning back the clock more than thirty-five years takes time—Kanalu learned things he had not known. He learned how painful it was for his friends to revisit his accident when, just fifteen years old themselves, they barely had the wherewithal to understand what was happening and to know what to do. Speaking Pidgin gave Kanalu and his friends the context they needed to carry out a long-overdue conversation.

One of the people who played a key role in Kanalu’s rehabilitation the first year after his accident was his Kamehameha School classmate, Debbie. As part of her community service work in high school, Debbie volunteered as a “candy striper” at the rehabilitation facility where Kanalu resided for a year after being discharged from the acute care hospital. Debbie and Kanalu had stayed in touch through the years, and once, when both Debbie and I were visiting Kanalu, she told us the story of her mother’s dogged push to learn to speak Standard English. We interviewed Debbie’s mother, Teresa, and learned how, while a scholarship student at Mid-Pacific Institute, she had worked with a speech professor from the University of Hawai‘i to change the way she spoke. In the interview, Teresa told us

“You see, I could not distinguish the “i,” so for ship, I would say, “sheep,” and for the “th’s,” I would say “de.” All my sounds were wrong.” Teresa spent hours on the hill above Mid-Pac Institute, chanting exercises with strings of “th” words to learn to pronounce Standard English. “It

grew on me the longer I remained in school that I needed to improve—but you cannot transform a person’s language overnight.”

Teresa succeeded, winning speech contests, gaining entrance to and graduating from the University of Hawai‘i, and becoming a teacher. As a teacher, she vividly recalled the frustration of having her speech corrected when she could not hear the difference between the sounds of Hawai‘i Creole and Standard English. When her students spoke Pidgin—as many of them did over many years—she chose never to correct them outright but instead to model Standard English.

Sue McCabe, a native Pidgin speaker from the Big Island who learned to speak Standard English while living and working in Oregon, took a different approach when she worked as a professor in the speech department at the University of Hawai‘i. The university required that every undergraduate pass an oral English test in order to graduate. Speech 101, 102, and 103, three semester-long classes, were designed to “de-Pidginize” (my word) the speech of Hawai‘i’s university students.

But Sue ran into a problem teaching her students. They would tell her that they did not want to sound like haoles. “Succeeding” by taking on the speech and mannerisms of Caucasians became too high a price to pay for many students. “Talking like a haole” implied turning your back on family, friends, ethnic group, and neighborhood, moving away from group identity and becoming instead a self-defined individual. As Kanalu says of Hawai‘i, “If the United States is defined by rugged individualism, Hawai‘i is the land of rugged group-ism.”

Pidgin and the behaviors that accompany it—hanging back, enjoying people, not feeling rushed—pull and keep local people together. A willingness to speak Pidgin, even if fluent in English, acknowledges a willingness to belong in Hawai‘i, an acceptance of the people and customs that make Hawai‘i unique. To stand apart from Pidgin—to condemn it for its sound, its pace, and the “attitude” it engenders—suggests a wish to erase Hawai‘i’s multi-ethnic past and to encourage Hawai‘i to develop as quickly as possible like any other American state. Stories told in Pidgin become post-plantation tales of belonging.

Far from a sign of shame, Pidgin speakers and non-Pidgin speakers alike should revel in the accessibility of a history whose accents, rhythms, and turns-of-phrase still excite us. The product of a multitude of cultures that prize ancestry

and honor older generations, Pidgin keeps alive the spirit of an earlier era Hawai'i, one before the time of freeways and cell phones. At its best, Pidgin reminds local people of who they were and warns them against what they might become. At its worst, it can become an excuse for resisting skills that might make a difference for the individual and the group alike. If Kanalu would cease to be whole without Pidgin, it is in large part because the language retains the touch and taste of all who have come before and made him who he is.

Not bad, brah, e?
