Maile Marguleas

CYES Praxis Course

Positionality and Identity in the World

"Your name is not just a word but a piece of your identity and heritage. It carries your story and shapes how you see the world—and how the world sees you."

[Insert name here]. Your name. That is the first thing you are given in this world. The first word you write on your paper is the first sound from your mouth. Your name is not just a word but a piece of your identity and heritage. It carries your story and shapes how you see the world, and the world sees you. My name is KaMaileleiu'ilauli'i Elisabeth Case Marguleas, and every part of it tells a story of my ancestors, my culture, and the path that has led me to where I am today.

In Hawaiian, my first name means "the beautiful lei adorned with flowers." Maile is a sacred plant used to make leis for holy ceremonies, representing beauty, connection, and respect. It symbolizes the islands I come from, where the natural world and human relationships are intricately woven together. My middle name comes from my mother's maiden name, Case, symbolizing Hawai'i's roots, while my last name, Marguleas, represents my father's lineage in the produce industry. These names carry the memories of those who came before me and the values I have inherited—the values of connection, service, and community.

I was born and raised in Hawai'i, where "aloha" is not just a greeting but a way of living—a framework of respect, reciprocity, and familial connection. These values were the foundation of my identity and daily life, from sharing meals with neighbors to calling strangers "aunty" or "uncle." Yet, attending elite private schools as one of the few students of mixed or Native Hawaiian ancestry complicated this belonging. I was simultaneously privileged and marginal—inside and outside dominant spaces. Here, I began to understand how macro

structures such as class stratification and settler colonialism shape access, voice, and power.

Drawing on the second theory of identity construction—where macro structures (like colonialism, race, and class systems) shape identity while still allowing individuals agency—I understand my identity as both imposed and reclaimed. Critical theorists remind us that identity is always in process, “a production,” not a fixed essence. Growing up in Hawai’i, I was taught to value community, but I also saw firsthand how structures like tourism, gentrification, and economic inequality distort community values for profit. My lived experience mirrors Hall’s assertion that identity is shaped by cultural narratives shaped by history and power.

Moving to the mainland for college made this even clearer. At Clark University in Massachusetts, I noticed how institutions replicate systems of extraction and dependence, mirroring Hawai’i’s tourism-based economy. Like Hawai’i, Clark relies on outsiders for sustainability while maintaining a strained relationship with its local, often under-resourced community. This parallel opened my eyes to structural inequality, not just as a Hawaiian issue but as a widespread reality. My identity as someone from a place often romanticized but economically exploited gave me insight into how systemic inequalities replicate across geographies.

For me, “home” is not just a place but a feeling—a sense of belonging not tied to one location but to the people and communities that make you feel at ease. People can have more than one home. Home can be a person, a feeling, a place, or a community that nurtures and supports you. When I ask people, "Where is home?" it is not just about geography but about connection. My connection to Hawai’i is firm—no matter where I go, I always feel the call of the ocean, the mountains, and the spirit of the land. Nevertheless, I also know that home can be found in the people you surround yourself with and the communities you help build. It is about

making people feel heard, seen, and valued.

But theory alone does not capture the whole story. I also possess agency. I choose how to represent my heritage, build relationships across differences, and carry the spirit of aloha into new spaces. My experience in community organizations like Winner's Camp in Hawai'i—where I moved from camper to leadership staff—has shown me that transformation begins at the interpersonal level. I help create spaces where youth feel safe, valued, and seen. In doing so, I redefine what it means to be a leader and a community member.

Among the most salient aspects of my identity are my cultural heritage, gender, and socioeconomic position. This has taught me to value cultural survival and understand how stories can be resistance tools. As a woman, especially in leadership, I often feel the tension between expected nurturance and assertiveness. Gendered expectations are macro-level constructs I must navigate daily, particularly in emotionally demanding community work.

My class background also complicates my identity. Though I am part of Hawai'i's privileged class by private education and economic stability, I am deeply connected to communities affected by generational trauma and financial hardship. This dual perspective shapes my approach to social justice, not from a savior mentality but from one of mutual aid, solidarity, and learning.

Social identity profoundly shapes how I interact with others, especially across race, class, and national lines. On the mainland, I'm often seen as "exotic" or "ethnic," assumptions that flatten the complexity of identity. I resist this by intentionally sharing my story, centering indigenous perspectives, and disrupting romanticized narratives of Hawai'i. My goal is to make invisible labor and cultural erasure visible.

The spirit of aloha informs my ability to bridge differences. Whether connecting with a

new peer, working in a diverse community space, or advocating for systemic change, I carry a relational mindset rooted in reciprocity and care. I have learned that practical social justice work is not about centering oneself but co-creating spaces where everyone belongs.

But I've also learned to set boundaries. Community work can be draining, especially when your identity is tied to your purpose. I've had to ask myself, "How much can I give before I lose myself?" This tension is not unique but amplified by being a young woman of color in activist spaces. I've started to embrace collective care and sustainability, knowing that change is a marathon, not a sprint.

My identity shapes my trajectory not just in terms of opportunity but also in how I define success. I don't seek accolades or titles—I seek impact, connection, and justice. Being rooted in a culture that values community over individualism has taught me that power lies in relationships. I may not change the world alone, but I can be part of building something better—one story, one space, one moment at a time.

I believe identity is not just something we inherit or resist—it's something we co-create in conversation with the world. My journey from Hawai'i to Massachusetts, from camper to community leader, reflects the interplay between structure and agency, tradition and transformation. I am still becoming, still learning, navigating. But I do so with intention, carrying the values of aloha, justice, and care into every space I enter.

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