Maile Marguleas

CYES Praxis 2025

CYES Theory of Social Inequality

From a young age, I was taught that we were all family. Growing up in Hawai‘i, I was immersed in a multicultural environment that appeared to embody the ideal of a “melting pot.” Here, people of different races, ethnicities, and cultures coexisted, shared food, called strangers “auntie” or “uncle,” and created a sense of collective belonging. It was a world where Spam musubi, laulau, and manapua were comfort foods, and cultural mixing was a way of life. But looking back through a critical lens, I see that even within this harmony existed a kind of “bubble”—a space where my identity was understood, validated, and reflected to me.

That sense of recognition vanished when I left that bubble and entered a predominantly white academic space in Massachusetts. My difference was no longer familiar, layered, or celebrated—foreign and exotic. People would ask me, “Why would you leave paradise?” At first, I brushed it off as innocent curiosity, but I soon realized it was rooted in a deeper assumption: Hawai‘i was simply beaches and luaus, not a real place with real social problems. This paper explores how I make sense of social inequality through Critical Social Theory, using my experience to show how power, culture, and identity are negotiated in everyday life. I argue that inequality persists not only through overt oppression but also through the normalized assumptions that reward conformity and punish difference.

The "melting pot" is often framed as a symbol of inclusion in the U.S., but it functions more as a pressure cooker in practice. Rather than allowing diverse cultures to retain their unique flavor, the pot demands that they dissolve into one dominant mold—white, middle-class, English-speaking, and Christian. This expectation doesn't always come in the form of laws; it’s embedded in school rituals like reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, dress codes that suppress

cultural expression, and cafeteria menus that prioritize pizza over laulau (who could not want laulau?!). The result is a subtle yet powerful form of erasure.

When I arrived in Massachusetts, I felt this pressure almost immediately. Though I may have physically blended into the crowd, but I was seen as different when I opened my mouth or shared where I was from. “You’re from Hawai‘i? Why would you come here?” That question may seem harmless, but it reduces my home to a fantasy and flattens my identity into a postcard. In their eyes, Hawai'i was paradise, not a place with histories of colonization, economic struggle, and cultural resistance. I became responsible for educating others, constantly correcting their misunderstandings. That responsibility was not just exhausting—it was a burden that revealed how institutions often demand assimilation while offering no understanding in return.

Critical Social Theory asks us to consider: How does power operate? Who gets to belong without explanation? In predominantly white institutions, whiteness is the unspoken norm. It functions invisibly until someone deviates from it, and that deviation must then be explained, defended, or erased. Being local from Hawai’i meant I was cast as “other,” even though I am American. The assumption that whiteness is neutral and everything else is an identity to be managed is one of the most powerful—and invisible—ways inequality is maintained.

This ties into another key insight from Critical Theory: systems of inequality often shift blame from structures onto individuals. In my case, when I expressed discomfort or felt alienated, I was advised to “adjust” or “get used to it.” The onus was on me to conform, not on the institution to change or reflect on its biases. This narrative of personal responsibility ignores how structures shape our choices, opportunities, and even our sense of self. I risked ridicule or exclusion if I spoke pidgin, brought traditional food to lunch, or referenced Hawaiian history. I had agency, yes—but that agency came with real costs.

Maile Marguleas

CYES Praxis 2025

Navigating the tension between structure and agency is one of the most complex parts of understanding inequality. If we focus only on systems, we risk portraying marginalized people as powerless. But if we focus only on individual choices, we ignore the massive forces that constrain those choices. I reconcile this tension by acknowledging that while people have agency, it is always shaped by the structures around them. For example, I chose to leave Hawai‘i for college, but that decision was shaped by broader cultural messages that equated success with leaving the islands for the mainland. I could decide how much of my identity to reveal—but even that choice was filtered through how others would react.

Despite these constraints, people can resist and reshape the structures around them. For example, programs rooted in social emotional learning and cultural humility give students tools to recognize and honor differences. Educators who create space for multiple identities in their classrooms help challenge the status quo. However, these changes must be systemic, not just interpersonal. Accurate equity requires more than kindness—it demands structural change.

My philosophy for understanding social inequality is grounded in the belief that diversity is not the problem—erasing it is. The irony of the “melting pot” is that it claims to unify us while demanding uniformity. We need a new metaphor: not one pot, but many—each simmering with its history, flavor, and wisdom. When asked to check a single box for your identity, one is reminded how much the system demands simplification, because we can be both and more.

Ultimately, Critical Social Theory teaches us that inequality is not only about money or access but also about visibility, recognition, and voice. My journey from a multicultural home to a monocultural institution revealed how deeply assumptions, stereotypes, and silences shape our lives. Power isn’t always loud—it often whispers what we are expected to hide. Yet, even within these systems, people like me push back. We refuse to melt. We stir the pot. And in doing so, we

create space for a more just and pluralistic society.