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Beyond In/Visible Tokens: Complicating Narratives of Blackness and Belonging at an Oceanic University

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This photo essay incorporates a creative visual ethnic studies approach to express Black students' experiences, understanding, and concerns on oceanic Blackness and belonging at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. The students, from Hawai'i and the continental United States, share their thoughts on how the university and island provide possibilities for oceanic ways of thinking about Blackness that render them invisible, visible, safe, threatened, complicated, and whole on campus and in Hawai'i. These visual vignettes reflect how students negotiate with their presence on a campus with few Black students, staff, and faculty, where they feel a lack of connection in nearly all locations on campus yet strive to develop a sense of belonging through interpersonal relations and possibilities.

As an Indigenous serving institution known for its diverse student population (University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2023), Black students at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa are an often forgotten part of the community, with few resources available to them to create and foster a strong sense of belonging and connection during their educational journeys. Often referred to as an absent presence and present absence in Hawai'i (Sharma, 2011; 2021), students of African descent represent 1.8% of the 19,074 students, a relatively low number reflecting the less than 3% Black population in the islands. This photo essay presents visual vignettes as a window into the experiences of the 1.8% and highlights the intricacies of Black student experiences on campus. I focus on four former and current students affiliated with the Black Student Association as they engage in creative, introspective dialogue surrounding Blackness and belonging on campus and in Hawai'i. Each photo represents their responses to a

series of prompts on how they envision Blackness in an oceanic setting, what belonging means to them, where they felt the strongest and weakest sense of belonging on campus, and how this relates to the possibilities of Blackness through an oceanic framework.

To create the images, I collaborated with each student to ensure we shared a creative vision and direction. Each set of images is based on our dialogue shared prior to the meeting, where we then selected the sites where each image would be created. To signify spaces where they did not belong, felt invisible, or received microaggressions, the students would cloak themselves under a black cloth, either partially or fully covered. I asked each student to remove the cloth and wear the clothing that best signifies them when in places of belonging. Each student added their own element to these images through a brief conversation recalling their answers, helping them immerse in the memories tied to the given space.

The resulting images highlight the complexities that Black students face on a campus hailed for its diversity and an island promoted as a multicultural paradise. This photo essay critically engages with the calls by these students for more to be done by all campus constituents to ensure the campus is safe, inviting, and encouraging for Black students in their struggles to find belonging in the presence of anti-Blackness on the island and beyond the continent. From experiencing tokenism from colleagues and throughout campus to racism from peers, these four students highlight the intricacies of finding belonging in the face of anti-Blackness that remains pervasive on campus. Their sense of belonging, collectively, highlights a slice of diversity among the Black students on campus, many of whom form communal ties through organized structures and

departments; simultaneously, students feel that no space is safe for them to fully be. This highlights a different aspect of what Christina Sharpe (2016) compels us to question regarding how we live the afterlife of slavery in what Teresia Teaiwa (2017) refers to as a narrative of Blackness in the Pacific, one that compels us to address the legacies of race, enslavement, colonialism, and settler dynamics beyond continental frameworks.

By addressing the histories, movements, and ideas related to Blackness through an oceanic lens, the resulting images and dialogue with students highlight the need for campuses and constituents to address diversity, inclusion, equity, and justice work on university campuses beyond the continent. In addition, their experiences solidify the need to challenge anti-Blackness in all spaces on campus to ensure the safety of Black students, staff, and faculty, a measure all will benefit from.

LaJoya



Image 1. LaJoya (self-identifies as a Black woman) stands, veiled in black, in the middle of the field by Hawai'i Hall.

In our conversations, LaJoya noted that she felt the least belonging throughout the majority of campus. She notes:

Blackness is highly tokenized on our campus. Our campus focuses on diversity without interrogating if different racial groups are thriving. As a result, Black students have low rates of first-second year retention, and our 4 and 6-year graduation numbers are low. Black students' treatment on our campus is in line with what I've experienced in the South and Midwest.



Image 2. LaJoya, on where she feels the least belonging.

LaJoya states:

I am not sure where I fit within the broader campus community. I think that I am well known because I have put in several years of work to support Black students and I am one of approximately 50 Black graduate students, but I am not sure if that means I am a member of the larger campus community.”



Image 3. LaJoya stands in front of one of the few buildings where she finds strong ties and a sense of belonging: George Hall, which houses the Department of Ethnic Studies on campus.

For LaJoya notes that finding a place of a sense of belonging was limited on campus.

She shares:

Belonging means that I am free to show up as my most authentic self. For me, this happens in the affinity groups I have created or co-created (e.g., The Sister Circle Mānoa & the Black Student Association). I have not found a space on the island where I find a strong sense of belonging. However, I feel the strongest sense of belonging through the relationships I have formed with friends. I feel the strongest sense of belonging on campus in my department & in the affinity spaces I have created.



Image 4. A close-up of LaJoya in front of George Hall.

When asked about the possibilities of Blackness beyond the continent, she noted:

I think one of the greatest possibilities is understanding how being in the Pacific informs how people understand Blackness. There is an assumption that I am military-connected or on vacation. I am automatically read as not being from here. Another possibility or realization is how Blackness gets placed on non-Black folks in Pacific contexts (e.g., blackbirding).

Bliss



Image 5. Bliss (self-identifies as Black and Asian, African American and Japanese, and female) sits with the black cloth over her shoulders in the middle of a seating area in Campus Center.

Bliss lamented about how this location on campus was where she feels the least belonging:

I feel swallowed up by the students during passing period. I feel invisible, awkward, and uncomfortable there. I feel like an outcast partly because I don't look like a lot of the students on campus. On the island, I feel the weakest sense of belonging in spaces like Waikiki, where there are hordes of tourists that are much like the people from my hometown. There is a sense of entitlement and superiority that makes me not want to be around them at all.



Image 6. Bliss, illuminated by sunlight while covered by the black cloth.

Bliss reflected on what Blackness means to her:

Blackness on campus is like a small seed that has just sprouted a green leaf. There's so much potential, and so much hope, but it is small and easily overshadowed. Unfortunately, growing up in Orange County did not provide me with a variety of forms of Blackness. The Blackness I've witnessed has been limited and marginalized to sports and entertainment. I feel as though on campus, Blackness is quiet and only prominently celebrated in microcosms like sports and BSA.



Image 7. Bliss stands on the side of the Queen Lili'uokalani Center (QLC), one of the few places on campus she feels the most belonging.

At the QLC, Bliss notes:

On campus, I felt the strongest sense of belonging in the Women's Center at QLC. I came from a tornado of a past with some seriously heavy baggage, and the Women's Center was the place where I first found relief and support. It was my safe space where I could rest and regulate my nervous system. I was always met with kindness, camaraderie, and care. It will always hold such a special place in my heart because it was the birthplace of some lifelong friendships and transformation for me. On the island, I felt the strongest sense of belonging at UH Mānoa. I unfurled my hopes, dreams, desires, and passions there. I was challenged beyond belief and came out on top. On campus, I met people who inspired me, who believed in me, and pushed me to succeed even when I doubted I could.



Image 8. For Bliss, Blackness is something she grew to recognize more while living in Hawai'i.

Bliss shares:

The possibilities that exist around Blackness and being in Hawai'i compared to living in Orange County are astronomical to me. I don't feel dehumanized or disrespected by people in stores for not being perfectly made up. I don't feel like the police will kill me when I'm driving the streets. I encounter so much less racial hostility and nastiness, so it has made my general living a lot more peaceful. I have found myself able to embrace my Blackness more here, when before, I was terrified and felt the need to hide it to survive. I've delved into protective Black hairstyles, and have come out of my shell. I'm not ashamed of how I speak, my interests, or my brown skin. I've allowed myself to find beauty in my ethnic background and in myself here, which is new for me."

Zoar



Image 9. Zoar (self-identifying as an African American man on the UHM basketball team) sits at the steps leading into Campus Center, a space where he finds belonging alongside his teammates.

Zoar states:

Campus center because that is where I normally see most of my teammates, whether they are on the way to the next class or chilling by the tree waiting for their class to start. Besides, that would probably be in the locker room because that's where [sic] majority of my friends that are black are...

[Belonging] I think it just means to be comfortable around a group of people. I feel like it looks [sic] The same on and off campus.



Image 10. Zoar smiles for the camera as he discusses his definition of Blackness and how it manifests in Hawai'i.

Zoar defines Blackness as:

Blackness is everything that embodies the culture. You can feel that in the way we speak, dress, and look. It feels like us all growing up in the same house under the same rules.

I think it's a safe environment to be black. There's not as much racism. But at the end of the day, you can definitely get lost in the fact that you don't see as much [sic] people who look like you do."



Images 11a & 11b. Zoar stands under the black cloth in front of Crawford Hall, a place he finds the least sense of belonging.

Zoar describes Crawford Hall as:

Crawford Hall... I just don't see as many black people in the classes that I have over in the building, and on top of that, there aren't many black people in the communications department, especially at the graduate level, whether that be with the teachers or students so I definitely feel like an outsider especially when I give certain examples in class people don't understand where I'm coming from."

Luffy



Image 12. Luffy (self-identifying as a Black / African American male) stands on the opposite steps of Zoar at Campus Center, a space that represents the steps leading into Campus Center, one of many spaces of least belonging to him.

Luffy shares:

It is hard to narrow my answer to this question to one place because I find it astronomically hard to find a sliver of comfort in any place I go to as a Black gay man. However, I recognize how I am the complete opposite of almost everyone else in the population, and when people stick out like that, chances are they are punished for that.

The Hale Aloha Cafe is a place that I can think of, a place I don't feel like I belong. One night as I grabbed dinner, I look behind me and see a group of white male students pointing and side-eyeing and laughing at me. It didn't take me two seconds to understand why this was happening. I stick out because I am Black, and because I wore a crop top with earrings, I was an easy target. All I could do

was repeat the words in my head, "you're ok," as fast as I possibly could until I left the building.

First of all, that was the most childish, most middle school thing I have never seen a group of college students do in an open and social setting to also be on the receiving end of it, all by myself with nobody around to support me was hard. That feeling is how I feel every time I step outside of my dorm room.

This semester, I have been in my rebirth era, where I walk outside with more feminine clothing and newfound confidence. Of course, I am terrified that I am still and always will be a walking and flashing target, but I have found at least some peace within it. If I am going to be a target regardless of what I do, what I wear, and who I interact with, I might as well be a sexy target.



Image 13. Luffy stands cloaked, eyes closed with black tears under his left eye, a representation of how he envisions Blackness on campus.

Luffy tells how he envision Blackness:

Blackness is close to invisible on campus, in my opinion. It's almost as if I was told to look for a needle in a haystack the size of a basketball court, and the needle isn't even there. That's a sad realization that I have come to terms with that I feel invisible and that I have almost not a single person who looks like me and lives like me to feel an ounce of validation. And not only is that an issue, but people around me rub salt in the wound by attempting to erase my own Blackness from within. My Blackness, just like everyone else's Blackness, is one of a kind. And because of that, I shine one huge spotlight on it because it deserves the spotlight, and it deserves to be seen and noticed. My Blackness is also similar to others. Similar in struggle, similar in core memories, similar in routines even. And it's a beautiful ritual of mixing my Blackness with others through complex relationships, simple conversations, and other means of interaction.

The beautiful thing about Blackness is that it is versatile. It is never the same as someone else's Blackness. There may be one or even many similarities, but experiences and emotions are and can never be replicated entirely. Because of this, Blackness is a complex and unique goddess that shines so bright and will never dim.

In my experience in Hawai'i, it has been hard to connect with other Black people and even find them in the first place. Black people make up 2.2% of the population in Hawai'i, and within that small group of people, ideologies may not mesh together, some may not be as accepting, and the list can go on an [sic] on. But those who are accepting and wish to participate in a "Blackness exchange" are keepers.

Compared to Colorado, Hawai'i doesn't do so well. I believe that is one contributing factor to why I am much more comfortable in Colorado than in Hawai'i. In Colorado, Blackness is more visible, whether it be positive or not so positive.



Image 14. Luffy stands along the railing of the Zone 20 parking structure, a place of comfort and belonging.

Luffy states:

When I moved to Hawai'i in 2020, I needed to find comfort and security in something, someone, or someplace to feel a sense of protection and belonging in an unfamiliar environment. That something that delivered that feeling of safety came from the Zone 20 Parking Structure. On many restless nights, I walked from my dorm room to the Parking Structure to either dance, run, think out loud, cry, or just listen to music. It became my home away from home, the place that fully accepted who I am as a person. There weren't people around, and I somehow found that comforting...

...I am realizing that the theme of these two places is desolate. It's weird to believe that I, a germaphobe and an extravert, found as much joy in a place that is dirty and lonely as I did. Yet, I found beauty in the places, and I look forward to not just finding more places that I feel comfortable in but also dissecting the reasons as to why I find comfort in those places.



Image 15. Luffy, smiling in his space of comfort.

Luffy shares his thoughts on belonging in an oceanic college setting:

Belonging, in its most precious and truest form, is a sense of euphoria. The feeling of each breath being deeper than the previous and hypervigilance is a thing of the past. On campus, belonging should look like a diverse group of

people who are all part of a larger community, all working together for a common goal of happiness and love. Same for off-campus but an even more diverse and larger group of people still achieving the goal together.

But belonging, unfortunately, doesn't look like that on campus or off campus. Because it is hard for some individuals to truly be accepted, they find belonging in smaller spaces and groups of people, yet still try to achieve the same goal. Many people find belonging within themselves, and I am one of those people. I know that I can accept myself, and I can love myself for who I am. I have always been aware of the goal to achieve, but it is my inner self that is putting this into action, especially this semester. If ethereal was a feeling, that is how my own sense of belonging feels.

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