

JCSCORE

Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity

The Journal of the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education

E KOLO ANA NŌ KE ĒWE I KE ĒWE: OUR GENEALOGY OF BUILDING PŌPOLO & KĀNAKA 'ŌIWI SISTERHOOD THROUGH THE SISTER CIRCLE AT MĀNOA

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Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity
Volume 10, Issue 1 | 2024

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The *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity* (ISSN 2642-2387) is published by the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE), a production of the University of Oklahoma, in partnership with the University of Oklahoma Libraries.

E kolo ana nō ke ēwe i ke ēwe: Our genealogy of building Pōpolo & Kānaka ‘Ōiwi sisterhood through the Sister Circle at Mānoa

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Traditionally, “sister circles are support groups that build upon existing friendships, fictive kin networks, and the sense of community found among Black women” (Neal-Barnett et al., 2018). The context of attending an Indigenous-serving institution grounded in Native Hawaiian culture, values, and knowledge, coupled with the dearth of Black women attending the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, causes us to reimagine what a traditional sister circle might look like. Hence, we describe the importance of Black and Indigenous women’s solidarities and how they are shaped and informed by place. Within this reflection, we describe how ‘ike Hawai‘i (Hawai‘i centered knowledge) and ‘āina (land) inform the ways in which we create and sustain community for ourselves and other women of color attending UH Mānoa.

In this community spotlight, we reflect on our experiences as wāhine Pōpolo (Black Women) and Kānaka ‘Ōiwi (Native Hawaiian) living, learning, and organizing at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UH Mānoa). Within this reflection, we describe how ‘ike Hawai‘i (Hawai‘i centered knowledge) and ‘āina (land) inform the ways in which we create and sustain community for ourselves and other women of color attending UH Mānoa. To accomplish this, we open with an acknowledgment of ‘āina and how the context of Hawai‘i informs how we created the Sister Circle at Mānoa (SCM). Next, we reflect on our individual positionality statements, specifically our relationships to ‘āina and our shared positionality as a hui (group). Finally, we describe the origins of the Sister Circle at Mānoa, our core pillars, and our hope for Pōpolo and ‘Ōiwi wāhine’s community-building practices.

The University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

The University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UH Mānoa) is located in the ‘ili of Mānoa, ahupua‘a of Waikīkī, moku of Kona, and mukupuni of O‘ahu. It is the place that has pulled us in and continuously nourishes us, whether it be because of ‘ike (knowledge) or our pilina (interdependent relationships). It is a place where we, as Pōpolo and ‘Ōiwi wāhine, unite and build community. Mānoa is the space where our stories merge.

Black students comprise 1.8% of all students enrolled at UH Mānoa. In the Fall of 2022, Black women earned 0.64% of all undergraduate degrees awarded, 1.16% of all

master's degrees awarded, and 1.03% of all doctorates awarded at UH Mānoa (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2022). By comparison, Native Hawaiian students comprise approximately 15% of the total student body at UH Mānoa (University of Hawai'i at Mānoa) (2019). In 2022, Native Hawaiian women earned 2.84% of all undergraduate degrees awarded, 5% of all master's degrees awarded, and 3.09% of all doctorates awarded at UH Mānoa. During that same time period, white women earned 17.43% of all undergraduate degrees awarded, 22.82% of all master's degrees awarded, and 36% of all doctorates awarded at UH Mānoa (University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, n.d.). While important, the data on Pōpolo and 'Ōiwi wāhine graduation rates reveal only part of the story. In our work, we are interested in what the data does not reveal. Specifically, how do Pōpolo and Kānaka wāhine navigate UH Mānoa? Where are the spaces of support, affirmation, and care for these wāhine? Through the Sister Circle Mānoa (SCM), we seek to understand these questions and endeavor to provide a space to address these needs.

UH Mānoa's strategic plan describes its intentions as a "community-serving university grounded in a Native Hawaiian place of learning that summons our rich knowledge systems to help mālama Hawai'i and the world for future generations" (University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2024). However, as Lipe explained (2014), "UHM is a predominately non-Hawaiian university by every definition, thus the culture and environment of the institution make it difficult to implement the strategic goal" (p. xi). Hence, the necessity of intentional spaces to support Native Hawaiians attending UH Mānoa is paramount. With this in mind, we seek to support Native Hawaiian wāhine in the SCM.

Traditionally, sister circles were created as spaces of support and empowerment for Black women (Johnson, 2015). As Neal-Barnett and colleagues (2018) explained, "sister circles are support groups that build upon existing friendships, fictive kin networks, and the sense of community found among Black women" (p. 267). However, the relatively small number of Black women attending UH Mānoa shapes our understanding of what a traditional sister circle may look like. In the SCM, we have made a conscious effort to expand our community to include the support of Pōpolo women, Kānaka 'Ōiwi wāhine, and other women of color. In addition, attending an Indigenous-serving institution like UH Mānoa provides an opportunity for us to rethink sisterhood as a way to deepen our relationships with our Kānaka 'Ōiwi relatives and sisters and to honor Kānaka 'Ōiwi wāhine ways of knowing and being. Accordingly, SCM recognizes the 'āina we inhabit and centers the relationships we have with both people and place. In this way, we embody the Hawaiian word pilina, which means connection, union, and relationship.

In the next section, we reflect on our individual positionality statements, specifically our relationships to 'āina and our shared positionality as a hui (group), and describe how Hawai'i has called us home.

The Rootlets, The Sisters, or The Sister-Scholars? Who are the Sisters? LaJoya's Story

For the majority of my schooling experience, I have been the token Black girl. This is primarily because I was raised in presumably colorblind and majority-white military enclaves. Being raised this way meant there were few spaces where I could show up as my most authentic self, especially in educational settings. To navigate my

token status, I encouraged teachers and students to use a shortened version of my name. I sought to disconfirm stereotypes about Black people by excelling in my studies and participating in extracurricular activities. Until relocating to O'ahu, I had not realized how much I had been socialized to shrink myself within educational environments. As an adolescent and into adulthood, I had been raised under the politics of respectability and the myth of meritocracy. This meant that I navigated educational and professional spaces in ways that did not fully embrace and celebrate my identity as a Black woman. In addition, my experiences as a Black woman navigating institutions of higher education (IHE) caused me to feel apprehensive about showing up in the fullness of my identity.

I entered UH Mānoa prepared to continue this practice. However, like many people of the Black diaspora who have relocated to Hawai'i, I experienced this place as a respite from the overt racism and anti-blackness ever-present in the Midwest. While discussing my positive experiences as a Pōpolo woman living in Hawai'i, however, I was challenged by a faculty mentor to consider how, if I was not experiencing overt racism in Hawai'i, who was? She challenged me to think about my kuleana (responsibility, privilege, burden) as a Pōpolo settler and benefactor of Hawai'i's continued occupation through the US military. While living and learning on this 'āina afforded me opportunities to embrace authenticity and consider new strategies for surviving higher education, I continue seeking ways to be a good relative to my Kānaka 'Ōiwi colleagues and collaborators.

Until 2022, I was the only Black woman in my department. The idea of a Sister Circle Mānoa (SCM) originated from my relationship with the second Black woman graduate student (BWGS) in my department, Niya. Given the dearth of BWGs attending UH Mānoa, most of my relationships with BWGs have been maintained through social media or during annual academic conference convenings. Once I learned that Niya had chosen to pursue her Master's degree in our department, I excitedly contacted her, offering her my support and guidance. Supporting Niya was a responsibility I embraced as an elder sister-scholar and advanced doctoral student. Our sister-scholar relationship is the foundation of the SCM.

The SCM is a space where I can express both leadership and vulnerability. My relationships with my sister-scholars extend beyond the classroom and campus; they have become Aunties to my daughter and affectionately call my partner Uncle. In the SCM, tropes of strength and anger do not burden or bar me from expressing vulnerability or asking for help. Within the SCM, I can just *be*.

Niya's Story

I come from Kanza, Kaw, Kickapoo, Osage, and Očeti Šakówiŋ lands (Lawrence, Kansas). I graduated from the University of Kansas (KU), where I obtained my Bachelor's degree in both Visual Art and African/African American Studies. I was heavily involved in Black and Indigenous student organizing and community spaces as an undergraduate student. I became a co-founder of the KU Black Student Coalition, a Black student-centered group that specifically organized peaceful protests and demonstrations that centered social justice for those in the Black Diaspora, Indigenous relatives, and other community members who faced injustices in our community.

I founded the KU Black Student Coalition (BSC) with another student, Keir Rudolph, in September 2020 after organizing a demonstration in support of Breonna

Taylor, who was killed in March 2020 by Louisville police. Our coalition organized several peaceful direct action initiatives between 2020-2022. The BSC supported our African peers by standing in solidarity with Nigerian protests against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), the specialized federal police unit founded in 1992. We organized with Haskell Indian Nations University (HINU) students to spread awareness for Black and Missing Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (Native Hope, 2023), an epidemic affecting our communities across the continental U.S. and Canada. After KU fired several notable Black faculty and proposed to cut 400 graduate teaching positions, we carried out an overnight demonstration that occupied the Chancellor's office from Thursday, March 11th, until the following day. My organizing experiences as a Black queer woman at KU ultimately led me on the path of running for, and being voted, Student Body President in 2021. I was only the second Black woman elected to this office in KU's history.

Now that Hawai'i is my home, and as I make sense of my placemaking here, I ask myself: What is my kuleana? How am I showing up as a good relative? What does it mean to call Hawai'i my home when there are Kānaka 'Ōiwi who are displaced from their 'āina? I circle back to my main reasons for choosing UH Mānoa: I was excited about my program's sense of community. I was embraced as a student, learner, and, even more so, a new member of an extended family. I understood that, in a department with so many diverse faculty and opportunities for growth, I would be professionally and personally fostered. This would be difficult to find at other institutions that only spoke empty words of decolonial education practices or lacked the Black and Indigenous communities to which I belong and/or with whom I wish to be in community. I was first introduced to traditional fishpond u hau humu pōhaku (rock weaving) by my dear friend and sister Alicia Nani Reyes. A defining moment of feeling 'home' in Hawai'i, specifically on the 'āina of O'ahu, has been through building deep relations with this land and people who hold me close as a sister, friend, and student. Huilua Loko I'a in the Kahana Bay community is a special place where I feel at home, as a haumana in my u hau humu pōhaku hui.

As a Black femme relative on Kānaka 'Ōiwi 'āina, I aspire to honor my ancestors and kupuna of this place by understanding, learning, and transforming educational and other spaces perpetuating colonialism and anti-Blackness. It is my kuleana to perpetuate relational knowledge and stories in the educational and community realms I inhabit. In this way, we are joining the legacy of our ancestors and future generations who advance the efforts of land back, Indigenous sovereignty, and Black liberation in the Hawaiian kingdom and beyond.

Alicia's Story

I am Kanaka 'Ōiwi (Native Hawaiian) and Mēxihcatl (Aztec), born and raised in Nuwu (Southern Paiute) lands known as Las Vegas, Nevada. Currently, I am a second-year PhD student in Educational Administration at UH Mānoa. Through education, I was afforded the opportunity to return home to the Hawaiian Kingdom in 2022. My journey back home came with intentions to reconnect with my ancestral homelands, 'ohana, and be immersed in my 'Ōiwi community. However, I recognize that I never grew up without community.

My 'ohana (family) lived in the inner city of Las Vegas, predominantly Black and Brown communities for the entirety of my childhood. Being immersed in the Black

community and culture in my neighborhood and at school made me who I am today. My understanding of community and caretaking relationships comes from the various Black women in my life. From helping me navigate my hair to encouraging me to speak up for myself, my sisters always showed up for me. This broader and more inclusive understanding of community affirmed my sense of belonging even as a Kānaka 'Ōiwi and Mēxihcatl woman born in the diaspora. Being in community has taken me this far in my education and now on this journey of being home.

Upon returning home to the Hawaiian Kingdom, I experienced some anxiety regarding how I would reconnect with my 'Ōiwi community. There were many things I did not know because I was not born and raised in Hawai'i. As a diasporic Kānaka, growing up away from Hawai'i complicated my relationship with my ancestral homelands and lāhui (nation). In some ways, I experienced disconnection with not having the opportunity to even visit home until my adulthood; however, being Kānaka 'Ōiwi in diaspora, I bring a body of knowledge and understandings from another place that I can give back to the lāhui. I may not have been born and raised on the one hānau (birth sands) of my kūpuna (elders, ancestors), but the place that I call home is still a place where I have come to understand the values of 'āina, 'ohana, and culture.

Immediately upon returning home and starting my PhD journey, I connected with Niya and LaJoya. They represent home for me. As the big sisters and eldest daughters of our families, as caretakers, and as community-centered organizers, we understand one another on a level I cannot find elsewhere. When I share my intentions of wanting to reconnect with home and being immersed in community, this includes Black community. I was honored to support my sisters in the creation and fruition of Sister Circle at Mānoa.

As we shared in our positionality statements above, our relationships with each other as graduate students and collaborators within the SCM mimic fictive kin networks (Cook & Williams, 2015; Minnett et al., 2019) and are non-hierarchical (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Minnett et al., 2019; Merriweather & Howell, 2022; Collier, 2024). In our respective roles (advanced doctoral candidate, newer doctoral student, and masters student), we benefit from, and contribute to, our collective knowledge and experiences within higher education.

Sister Circle at Mānoa

“A sister is both our mirror and our opposite, someone who is both ourselves and very much not ourselves, a special kind of double.” Toni Morrison

Our lived experience as a hui comprised of Pōpolo and Kānaka 'ōiwi wāhine attending IHE compels us to create spaces of safety and care for ourselves and each other. Within the SCM, we can create spaces that support our vision of what educational environments could look like if they centered Pōpolo and Kānaka ways of knowing and being. In this way, we reject white heteropatriarchal values of individualism and competition (Palmer et al., 2022) and choose Pōpolo and Kānaka 'ōiwi epistemologies of collaboration and support instead.

SCM is a place to connect and build community among Black women and femmes and the greater community of women and femmes of color at the UH Mānoa. Our hope is that SCM will be a space for Black women, Indigenous women, and other women of color to build meaningful relationships, commiserate about their experiences

with racialized and gendered microaggressions, and center Black women's unique experiences in higher education. Unlike traditional student-led organizations, which have an elected president, vice president, and other executive board members, we assembled a group of like-minded sister scholars committed to these ideals and supporting Black, Indigenous, and other women and femme of color attending UH Mānoa.

Core Pillars

The SCM has established pillars of community care, social justice, academics, and sisterhood to holistically support the professional and psychosocial development of Black, Indigenous, and other women and femme of color attending UH Mānoa. We chose these pillars to guide us as we create programming and build ourselves as an organization. Next, we describe each pillar.

Community Care. We center SCM as an organization that is part of a larger and loving community. Within SCM, we are intentional about the community we are designing. As such, we create space for community building and call-in as an act of care. Building relationships grounded in love, care, and reciprocity is central to the community we have established.

Social Justice. To ensure that we are accountable and responsible guests in our community and the Hawaiian Kingdom, we strive to uplift and support our Kānaka 'Ōiwi relatives through relationship-building efforts. For example, to celebrate Black History Month, the SCM visited Ka Papa Lo'i o Kānewai to participate in a community workday. During our visit, we learned about three important Hawaiian values: *laulima* (many hands working together), *mālama* (caring for the land), and *pu'uhonua* (a place of sanctuary). As we honor the 'āina where we live and learn, we recognize the ways in which 'ike Hawai'i informs our work in the SCM. We are committed to naming and dismantling systems and structures that oppress and marginalize Pōpolo and Kānaka 'Ōiwi wāhine within IHE. Finally, we center SCM as a place of allyship for our gender non-conforming and trans sisters. Within the SCM, sisterhood encompasses all gender expressions, including our gender non-conforming and trans sisters.

Academics. We center SCM as a space committed to supporting the academic journeys of Black, Indigenous, and other women and femme of color attending UH Mānoa. Given the underrepresentation of Black women faculty at our institution, we have been intentional about creating supportive academic spaces for ourselves. For example, we host a bi-weekly writing group, "Sisters United Who Write," for our members to complete writing assignments and other projects. In addition, to remind ourselves that Black onto-epistemologies are necessary and valuable within the academy, our group established and maintains the Phillis Wheatley Free Black Women's Library (PWFBWL). Our burgeoning collection includes academic texts, poetry, autobiographies, and more, all authored by Black women.

Sisterhood. As we shared above, our relationships resemble fictive kin networks (Cook & Williams, 2015). Black women's relationships with each other are well-documented within the literature as an essential component of their retention and success within IHE (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005). We continue this practice by centering SCM as a space where women and femme of color will build strong sisterly bonds. We consider our relationships with our sister-scholars as extensions of our family. Because of this, our relationships are rooted in relationality and reciprocal care. While we have

created this space for all Pōpolo and Kānaka 'Ōiwi wāhine, women from these communities do not exist as a monolith. Because of this, we recognize sisterhood as an intentional and deliberate practice by all participants.

Conclusion

E kolo ana nō ke ēwe i ke ēwe. *The rootlet will creep toward the rootlets.*

Of the same origin, kinfolk will seek and love each other.

To describe the aloha (love), pilina, and sisterhood created with the Sister Circle at Mānoa, we often contemplate the 'ōlelo no'ēau (wise proverb) "E kolo ana nō ke ēwe i ke ēwe" (Pukui, 1983). This poetic Hawaiian saying helps us deepen our understanding of connection as we become a metaphor for 'āina. LaJoya, Niya, and Alicia may have come from different places, but we were destined to be, live, and organize together. As the 'ōlelo no'ēau shares, ke ēwe (the rootlet) will find another ke ēwe. These rootlets represent us as sisters, and it is our shared identity as sisters and haumāna (students) that allows us to find and love one another.

The Sister Circle at Mānoa creates a space rooted in care, community, and collective reparations for Black women amongst our non-Black relatives. While we have intentionally created the SCM to be responsive to the needs of Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color, we know that other spaces of care and support for Pōpolo and Kānaka 'Ōiwi wāhine exist even if they may not be named as such. For example, Salis Reyes and colleagues (2020) asserted that their position in the academy is an act of ea (breath, life, sovereignty) and one of the many ways they ho'oko (fulfill) kuleana lāhui (nation-building responsibilities). As these wāhine 'Ōiwi continue to ho'oko their kuleana lāhui, they remember that "strength comes from knowing that we are not in that fight alone" (Salis Reyes et al., 2020). Therefore, we recognize that the SCM is not the only space for Pōpolo and Kānaka wāhine sisterhood and solidarity.

In the context of the UH Mānoa, several Pōpolo and Kānaka 'Ōiwi wāhine have navigated shared systemic barriers of racism, colonialism, and sexism embedded within the foundation of IHE. For example, in her seminal text *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*, Trask (1999) recounted the struggles of being one of the few Native Hawaiian women across the entire campus of UH Mānoa in the early 1980s. Despite having to contend with her own departmental chair and colleagues concerning the validity of her work, Trask later became one of the most renowned mana wahine 'Ōiwi (strong Native Hawaiian woman) scholars and facilitated the early expansion of Hawaiian Studies at UH Mānoa. Elsewhere, Kaopua (2013) described the challenges that Native Hawaiian women faculty face as they navigate institutional racism, sexism, patriarchy, isolation, marginalization, and the power and politics of higher education. As demonstrated within the literature, both Pōpolo and Kānaka 'ōiwi wāhine are navigating structures of racism and sexism present within IHE. Hence, the importance of spaces of collaboration and care.

As Pōpolo and 'Ōiwi wāhine sister-scholars, we rise together to reclaim our space within IHE. It is in this shared value of taking care of our community and lāhui where Pōpolo and Kānaka 'Ōiwi wāhine stand together. The composition of our hui speaks to the importance of Black and Indigenous women's solidarity. Like generations before us who were informed and inspired by Black and Indigenous resistance against racism, colonialism, patriarchalism, and other forms of marginalization, we recognize

that liberation for Black Women also means the liberation of Native Hawaiian women. In the SCM, we imagine a space where we focus not just on our struggles but also our triumphs against multiple and overlapping structures of oppression. In the future, Sister Circle at Mānoa will continue to be a space where Pōpolo and Kānaka 'Ōiwi wāhine will love and care for one another as we navigate the academy, our kuleana lāhui, and liberation for our future generations.

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