Nakem Pedagogy: Social Biography in Liberatory Education

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Learning about learning has been a beautiful, painful, and complicated process of moving in and out of spaces that have both nurtured my liberation and sustained my alienation. For most of my life, schooling has been both a place and process in which alienation has disguised itself as learning. When I reflect on my educational journey I realize that it is rare, even absent, for many people of color, immigrants, and indigenous peoples to experience in their K–12 and university education (formal education) a liberatory process of learning that engages the fullness of their identity and makes center their social location. For most of my schooling journey, I have struggled to *see* my self in the curriculum and pedagogy of state sponsored educational institutions. It was not until I finished my bachelor's degree and started working in marginalized, oppressed communities in California and Hawai'i that I began to think about education in more broad strokes. Up until that point it was difficult, or rather, I was made to believe that education, "real" learning, could only happen within state sponsored education. Ironically, it was informal education, learning that happened outside of the classroom, that led me to articulate an experience that was a catalyst for an alchemy of a liberative pedagogy.

Immersing myself in contexts and communities that did not have access to a middle-class life of privilege allowed me to see education as an expansive and inclusive process of learning. What developed from approximately eight years of doing popular education in largely working class, (im) migrant, diasporic, and indigenous communities is my articulation of a pedagogy that makes central the use of story and story-telling—I call this Nakem Pedagogy—Pedagogy of Soul Consciousness.

In this introductory article, I offer the genealogy of my articulation of an emerging pedagogical praxis. I offer, through my discussion of Nakem Pedagogy, the profound realization that comes from one's story—a story in itself, not simply a story as a tool or medium, but a story as empirical evidence of one's ontological becoming—an essential element in changing how we see and become in the world. The following ideas and experiences are the foundations of Nakem Pedagogy. Ultimately, it is what I hope will become a catalyst for a new vision that will create a pathway for an education that engages the depth of our humanity and steers us away from a fragmented way of being.

What is Nakem and Soul-Consciousness?

Nakem is an indigenous Ilokano word that has a myriad of meanings depending on how one uses it. Loosely, it can be translated as habit, manners, or feelings. However, in the context of this pedagogical project I define it as soul-consciousness. I do not intend to enter into a religious, philosophical, or metaphysical discourse on the nature and substance of the soul, rather I will use, in part, the definition that Rachel Kessler uses for soul in her work in education:

> I use the word soul...to call for attention in schools to inner life; to the depth dimension of human experience; to students' longings for something more than an ordinary, material, and fragmented existence (Kesserler 2000, x)

I add to Rachel Kessler's (2000) definition of soul and include in the "depth dimension of human experience" a call for the use of one's stories as rooted through the body, routed through genealogical ancestry and always tied to the land that one was born in and/or currently calls home. The soul in the indigenous Ilokano sense is the knowledge that consciously and unconsciously animates and mitigates our understanding of our selves and the world. The Ilokano language scholar, Aurelio Agcaoili (2012), in his Ilokano dictionary defines *nakem* five different ways:

> nakem (1) 1. A critical consciousness 2. a moral standard among Ilokanos 3. the measure of one's person 4. the core of one's being

nakem (2) 1. wisdom 2. knowledge 3. sagacity 4. mental acuity 5. intelligence 6. sagaciousness 7. braininess 8. sapience 9. perspicacity 10. sound judgement 11. reasoning

nakem (3) 1. free will 2. will 3. determination 4. a divine plan

nakem (4) 1. an idea 2. a thought 3. a reflection 4. an opinion 5. a point of view 6. a belief

nakem (5) 1. prudence 2. the quality of having a sound judgment 3. the quality of having discretion 4. the quality of being reasonable 5. the quality of having maturity in evaluating things 6. the quality of having discretion.

Indeed, *nakem* is all of the above and more. To use our *nakem*, soul-consciousness, means that we summon the totality of our being, including summoning not only our personal and immediate experiences but also our ancestors' experiences—for our measure, core, wisdom, knowledge, and various qualities of our being are always rooted in our ancestral genealogy. To use *nakem* in our pedagogy is to bring into the process of education this "critical consciousness" that is informed by our ontology, epistemology, and cosmology.

Social Biography: We are the Stories we tell

I grew up in constant movement between temporary homes. People going back and forth constantly searching for that elusive dream, hoping one day life will be kind. I was born on the base of a mountain overlooking the dry and parched earth of the Ilocos. My first memory was riding on the back of a water buffalo while my grandfather, with his slick bolo knife and thick straw hat, would make our way deep into the Ilocos valleys. I remember the strength of the water buffalo carrying us with a certain ease, stopping when tired, drinking when thirsty, and leaving deep muddy hoof prints, as if to mark where we had come from.

My parents moved to Manila when I was one year old. No mountains or water buffalos; instead, train tracks and skyscrapers. We did not ride on them or go in them. Poverty does not allow you to touch—only see—at the most. Despite growing up thirty feet away from the train tracks, to this day, I have never ridden a train. We ended up as squatters in Manila. My father banked on the promise that the Philippine government would grant him land for serving in the Philippine military—and he is still waiting. He was deployed to the war zones in Mindanao, and my mother would make her way back to the Ilocos. My father was not present when my sister was born, which was also the case when I was born.

And so, we went back to where the mountains embraced me. As soon as my baby sister could walk, we moved back to that home along the railroad. My mother, after coming up with ways to make a peso or two by selling vegetables and ice water would soon come to the difficult decision of migrating to Hawai'i. The dollar was more handsome to her than the peso. She said there were diamonds to be found in Hawai'i. So, she packed her bags, told my father to wait for our visas, and once they came, then we would be together with her again.

After a year of absence a six-year-old boy cannot tell the difference between one or two or four years of not seeing his mother. Absence is also absence of time. My mother came back waving the visas for my sister and me, but not for my father. He will have to wait.

My mother brought us to Hawai'i, but she found two jobs would not make enough diamonds to hire a babysitter, so she sent us back to the Philippines. My father was happy. My mother sent money to us while my young, retired military father assumed all the duties of a single parent.

In time, my mother returned with a visa for my father and soon after, all of us—father, mother, sister, and I would make that long trip to Hawai'i, America. But I learned that being together means something different in America than in the Philippines—it means you live near each other while never having to be with each other. My father would match my mother one job for another—four jobs together—and when my sister and I start working it would be six jobs altogether. Fast forward to today.

My sister graduated from college and is now living in Seattle. I, on the other hand, keep graduating from college. My father is retired. My mother will soon follow him into retirement, but for now she is still working—although only at one-and-a-half jobs. Happily-ever-after? Is this the "American Dream?"

When I look back at this painful journey, I realize now that I am not the only one with this story, and that many other immigrants have similar experiences. Throughout my formal schooling, I never talked about this experience;

perhaps because I was too busy learning about experiences other than my own. When I was in college I tried hard to forget about the coarse experiences of poverty and feeling ashamed of my working class roots, and, for a long time, I even denied that I was born in the Philippines. I never mentioned what jobs my mother and father had. I did not invite my friends to our cramped one-bedroom place. I lied about everything, especially about myself. And now I realize I could not tell this story about my experience and myself because, in reality, I was embarrassed by my story. I thought that it would be heard in a condescending way, or not heard at all. However, the truth is I did not understand myself, or view my life in context. I did not have a frame to understand myself and the complexity of my experience. I did not understand my story. I did not know I had a story.

However, the more I tell my story the more I begin to understand myself. Stories are not just stories; they are more than a retelling of events, more than merely anecdotes. When stories are entwined with other stories and strung together, they make up narratives that shape and give meaning to our lives—past and present. In short, my/our lives become meaningful when we speak and begin to give an account of events. Yet, I/we have not been given many chances to tell stories that speak to our experiences. I realize now that I have been labeled many adjectives in many kinds of stories: person of color, working class, (im)migrant, poor, squatter. Depending on the story, its time, and its place I am named: subaltern, third world, cyborg, oppressed, marginalized, subjugated, colonized, and slave.

Different names, similar experiences, often pathologized as "the problem" in need of being saved by a purportedly purer unsoiled self and always being written about and objectified. When do I/we get to tell my/our stories? What is the meaning of my/our stories? How do I/we find out the "truth" about my/our stories? And what stories do I/we tell about myself/ourselves when we do not know my/our stories? How do I/we tell a story affirmative of who we are and who we are not? Where do I/we begin?

My educational methodology is premised on the idea that epistemologically, ontologically, theologically, and pedagogically, stories matter. In an effort to illuminate and draw out the significance of these four dimensions I turn to the concept of social biography. Social biography is the theoretical frame in which I view stories. The concept of social biography has evolved throughout my experience working in various educational spaces.

Whereas the tradition of western academic research begins with the written text (books, journal articles, etc.), social biography begins with our lives, our bodies, our traumas, our hopes and fears—our lived experiences. This is not to strip away the power of the written text, rather we should give our lived experiences an equal seat at the table of knowledge and wisdom—our world must sit next to the word. To use our lived experiences means we make visible, through our (embodied) stories, what we see and feel—in addition to what we read.

The following section is a re-tracing of my work in both grassroots education and formal education in the university that led to my articulation of social biography.

Represent to Witness and Critical Faith

I came to the concept of Social Biography during a period of study in a seminary in Berkeley, California through my involvement in a youth leadership program called Represent to Witness (R2W) run by a popular educator and student of the late Paulo Freire, Michael James. R2W is an organization dedicated to youth leadership development among Asian and Pacific Islander (API), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ), indigenous, and working class youth. The youth leadership program was made up of young people of color from all over the United States—mainly from Hawai'i, Texas, California, New York, and Washington State.

For about two and a half years, I was immersed in a transformative way of learning and teaching that engaged both body and soul. By nature of being housed in a seminary, Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, the spiritual milieu of the place and the faith traditions of the youth and leaders brought out a constant engagement with the participants' faith/spiritual/wisdom traditions. Michael James developed a methodology called Critical Faith, an incorporation of liberation pedagogy and popular education with faith-based traditions—particularly Christian liberation theologies.

Discussions of faith were situated in issues such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and language and always in the context of colonization and imperialism. Here, the use of social biography, as an element of critical faith methodology, challenged assumed "truths" that participants held deeply. The sharing and witnessing of each other's social biography

described and exposed underlying colonial potencies that shaped the participants' lives. Under these conditions, stories become an apparatus for social critique. I came to see, for the first time, the use of faith traditions as a form of emancipation and decolonization, and I learned, for the first time, the use of stories, both personal and collective, as a vehicle for social change.

Rise Up! Roots of Liberation

After returning to Hawai'i from the seminary in Berkeley, I was hired by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Hawai'i Program Committee (currently known as Hawai'i, Peace and Justice: NāPua Ho'āla i ka Pono—"The flowers/youth rising in peace and justice") to run a youth program, Rise Up! Roots of Liberation, mainly composed of Filipino, Japanese, and Native Hawaiian youth. Here, I was able to develop what I learned through R2W and localize the curriculum and pedagogy that was used in Berkeley. With the majority of students coming from Native Hawaiian charter schools, the curriculum and pedagogy I used from R2W was indigenized to incorporate indigenous epistemologies and worldviews. While Michael James' educational team comprised artists and educators coming from faith-based traditions, the team that I worked with in *Rise Up!* comprised civil and indigenous rights activists who were steeped in the movement for a demilitarization of the Hawaiian Islands. Some were union organizers, some were women's rights advocates, and others were part of the Protect Kahoolawe 'Ohana (PKO). Being around people who represented complex political orientations gave me an understanding of the multi-faceted issues that face Hawai'i. The pedagogy for this particular program was infused with activist and more overt political orientations. Through this experience I took away a profound understanding of how much the *'āina* (that which feeds) is a source of knowledge and the impact it has on indigenous way of relationality.

(Un)bounded Classrooms

After doing popular education among youth in the Bay Area and Hawai'i, I was hired to teach in the Ilokano Language Program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM) during my graduate program in Asian studies. There, I began to teach in a more formal classroom setting and all the formalities took over me.

The syllabus was functioning like a contract. If it is not written down, it does not have to be followed. Short, compact, linear, and repetitive learning governs the classroom. Make sure your grading is clear. No talk of spirit. No mention of God or the sacred. The professor knows best. S/he is the teacher that teaches. Students sit and listen. It is all about the grades! Extra credit, yes please! Happy students equals good evaluations. No complaints, no lawsuits. Semester done. Repeat.

All lectures point to what will be on the test and students meticulously write every word, verbatim. Stories, whenever I use them, are viewed with ambivalence: "Will it be on the test?" is the enduring question I am asked. Educational institutions shape the ethos of the classroom. The seats are lined up in straight rows and columns, facing the chalkboard, where the teacher will pontificate. Bodies, too, are structured—students face forward, their backs are the only visible thing to each other, all the while the teacher sees all the faces—in one policing glance and panoptical posture.

The architecture of the classroom is built so the teacher and student do not see each other in a meaningful relationality—a pedagogy of apartheid: teacher/student, head/soul, theory/experience—binaries, boundaries, and borders shape the knowledge and relationship (re)produced in the classroom. Why (and how) is education a form of degradation? Under what condition does it destroy our curiosity for learning—for each other?

My soul was shrinking, and I strongly believed the souls of my students were shrinking as well. In an effort to recapture what I gained from (or what I saw transpire in) my Berkeley and AFSC experience working with youth, I decided to undo the boundaries of the classroom and the formalized syllabus. I turned to social biography and made stories central. I restructured the classroom so that it would revolve around the stories of the students—stories of their homes, parents, peoples. We then told stories *in* their homes, *with* their parents, *in front* of their peoples. In telling their stories, the students cried, laughed, got angry and scared, and became frustrated. However, I began to see that the students who initially complained about attending a once-a-week and two-and-and-a-half-hour class would stay for a couple more hours to talk-story and reflect on the meaning of what they had learned, after class—a kind of class *after* class phenomena. This noticeable shift from one of detachment

to a search for interconnectedness and yearning for a deeper meaning-making is what I call *nakem*—soul consciousness. In essence, the stories catalyzed *nakem* and Nakem Pedagogy was born.

Flipping the Script on the Text

At the time of this writing, budget cuts, standardized curricula, and testing based on common core standards are becoming the dominant practices of educational institutions. State-sponsored curriculum and textbooks are the students' primary instruments for learning in the K–12 educational arena. In higher education, though there are not any state-sponsored curricula, there are "cannons" or "classics" that are hailed and given a performative function with similar hegemonic scope. These texts are the primary instrument, codified in the holy syllabus and programitized in the sacred (or profane) curriculum. The answers to the test point toward the textbook. Because the "answer" is in the textbook, it creates a dangerous equivocation that the source of knowledge is found only in the textbook. Textbooks become an entrapment of learning and teaching—limiting the epistemological possibilities of understanding knowledge and the reality perceived.

We need to reimagine textbooks in multiple ways and make them more significant to students' lives. When textbooks are reimagined, they can become a source of emancipation for learners. If we imagine textbooks simply as containers of knowledge, bounded in a single space, read and recited, though not necessarily in printed form, then it is possible for us to see the soul as a textbook. Our soul carries in itself stories of ourselves and stories of how we perceive the world. These stories illuminate our experiences and inform and instruct us in navigating the world—these stories are also the basis of knowledge. Our stories as (unwritten) text, bound together by our soul, become a textbook.

Nakem pedagogy represents the belief that the primary textbook that ought to be used in class is our soul. When we conceive of the maxim "everything we need to know, we already know, but we just do not know it yet" as true, then all the (written) text in the traditional textbooks becomes equal to the text (story) embedded in our souls. It is not to say that the written word (books, articles, and scholarly materials) is valued less, rather the written words becomes deeper when they are situated in the lived experiences and immediate context of the world of the student/learner. Only when there is a dialogical relationship between the written text and the text of the soul can a liberative and emancipatory education happen.

Nakem pedagogy seeks to bring out, through our stories, the textuality of our soul—allowing us to engage the pages of our life and read the story that we carry in our soul. A pedagogy of soul consciousness makes the reading of the story embedded in our bodies the central concern in education. The stories that reside in the soul, intersected and interwoven, become the foundation of a literacy/understanding of the soul.

When we can begin to learn through telling our own story and hearing the stories of others' past and present experiences, we can re-signify those stories that have shaped and molded us into who we did not want to be and transform these stories in such a way that affirms who we want to become. Or rather, we can re-write and flip the script of the stories that have forced our souls to recite and inherit the story of the oppressors. In other words, we do not allow our stories to be a source of oppression, and instead we make our stories become a source of emancipation.

Nakem Pedagogy as Decolonizing Education

Our souls shrink in colonial classrooms. Isolated, alone, and partitioned-off from each other, our souls shrink when the four walls of the classroom do not allow us to speak to and hear each other. Our souls have the capacity to knock down or speak back to the four walls of the classroom, asking them their secrets and insights, but only if we are able to reimagine what the walls can be for the community of learners.

Here, I use walls in two different ways. In one sense, walls can function as artificial boundaries that separate us from communities, our environments, our connectedness, and our ability to seek knowledge that can nurture life. In this sense, walls become those barriers that box us in from the larger world and at the same time isolate us and keep us apart from each other. These walls limit our understanding of ourselves while perpetuating and promoting "knowledge" from a singular space, separating the academic from the personal, theory from experience, spiritual from secular, and anecdotal from empirical. The walls in this narrow definition become a fatalistic limitation.

In another sense, the four walls of the classroom can be imagined as the dynamic environment we live in—society at large. Walls in this sense represent the expanded boundaries of how far we can go and possibilities of the space we can transcend. Walls become the liminal space where we can discern where we are and where we want to go.

This dialogical relationship between our soul and the four walls can only take place when we can imagine the walls to be a container for learning and not a prison for domesticating the community of learners. Thus, walls ought to be always moving—inclusive and expansive but always a place in which the soul and the process of education make the self educable. The walls must be re-imagined as our home, the streets, the land and the ocean, popular culture, the near and far, the now and then. Walls, in a liberatory sense, are seen as an invitation to transgress one's immediate limitations—a liminal space of possibility.

Here, *nakem* pedagogy, or a pedagogy of soul-consciousness, can articulate and make audible the wounds that our bodies carry that are often hidden or suppressed in the classroom space. It can give insight to our experiences within colonial structures and show how our souls can be transformed. In addition, *nakem* pedagogy introduces and encourages the indigeneity of the students, enabling it to become manifest in the classroom and thereby influencing the direction of the curriculum in emancipatory ways.

Because we become the stories that we tell, it matters what story we tell about ourselves. If we harbor stories that always see ourselves in pathological ways—in terms of "lazy," "uneducated," "savage," "slave," and "colonized"—then our souls essentially become lazy, uneducated, savage, slave, and colonized. Stories have the power to write, mark, cut, sever, and fragment our soul. Stories empowered by social biography help us to see that our souls are written (often by others) and offer a vehicle to re-write, flip, reclaim, decolonize, the colonial experiences that we have inherited and have kept us socially fragmented and separated from each other. Stories framed through the methods of social biography have two interwoven capacities—one that allows us to expose the depth of the soul wound, and another that allows us to rewrite the stories that have placed limits on our selves.

In order for our souls to become mended (as oppose to fragmented), and our stories to become a source of emancipatory wisdom, we need to understand the forces that have shaped our souls into exilic silence and schizophrenic identity. How do we begin to see how our souls have gone through potent, traumatic, social, and political forces that have adversely affected the way we learn, understand ourselves, and construe the world we live in?

These forces are none other than the brutal encounter of colonization and the continued hegemonic instruments (vis-à-vis educational systems—schooling) that serves to sustain a colonized and fragmented self. Because schooling has largely been one of the primary tools of colonization, the classroom has been a site that has reinforced and privileged colonial values and narratives of domination and subordination. As a result, students are indoctrinated by the curriculum into a condition of assimilation and an inherited ontology of absence and fragmentation.

The ideas of soul, self, and ontology, though different and distinct, are inseparable and interrelated. I cannot see a fragmented self with a whole soul and ontology. Neither do I see a fragmented ontology that can result in a non-fragmented self and soul. Furthermore, a malnourished soul is a result of a fragmented self and ontology. Because all three are inseparable, I use all three interchangeably.

In my experience of teaching classes in Philippine popular culture, Philippine literature, community and culture in education, and Philippine cultural mapping in Hawai'i at the university as well as conducting popular education in various communities in Hawai'i and California, many of my students, when asked to speak about why their parents or grandparents moved to Hawai'i and the United States (majority of my students are between first and third generation), will reiterate the institutionalized myth of the material promise of the American Dream. They consistently make reference to the Philippines as a place of suffering and backwardness, and a place that one should leave in order to live a better life. In their view, America is where dreams come true and the Philippines is where nightmares are born. In fairness, they do not have the tools to recognize their colonial pedagogical inculcation. What forces shape or give credence to this recurring imagery of America and the Philippines? How can *nakem* pedagogy challenge and disrupt this perennial view?

Given their entrenched beliefs, I situate *nakem* pedagogy and the current educational milieu in a neo-postcolonial context. That is, I teach that we are living in a reality that has to a certain extent shed the formality

of colonialism and slipped into a more sophisticated arena of psychic and somatic enslavement and linguistic manipulation—colonial relationships have moved from feudalism to capitalism, master/slave to producer/consumer, and imperialism to globalization.

Students and teachers who want to teach and learn with a liberatory trajectory must be aware of the reality that has shaped their traumas and experiences, both individual and collective, and challenge spaces that perpetuate and sustain its violent existence. In doing so, we will be able to name structures, systems, and narratives that are sustaining our fragmented souls and identities. In turn, we will be able to remember or at least conceive of a past for/of our self/soul that was not colonized. Consequently, we will gain hope for an ontology that is not constructed on the ideals of a colonial imagination. In the final analysis, a soul-consciousness pedagogy will have profoundly re-oriented education as a practice of self-becoming and a reclamation and realization of ones historical selfhood. *Nakem* pedagogy in its visions of a liberatory education pushes the pedagogical boundaries outwards to take account of the use of stories and our soul-consciousness.

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