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This is a contribution from *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication* 24:2  
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# “Island girl from the island”

## Tattooed symbols and personal identities in contemporary Hawai‘i

Mie Hiramoto

This study investigates the construction of hybrid identity and cultural values as demonstrated by local Hawai‘i residents in the multiethnic urban community of Honolulu. Due to its unique historical background, Honolulu has become host to a variety of Pacific and East Asian ethnic and cultural communities, many of which are places wherein tattooing has been a traditional practice among the natives. Ideals of culturalized identity were espoused by tattoo wearers through discourse with the researchers. The results demonstrate that many wearers feel an interconnection or transnationalism with one or more of Hawai‘i’s constituent cultures, and often imbue tattoos with personal or cultural meaning, with the goal of displaying the semiotic ideology of their local specific identity in a Hawai‘i context.

**Keywords:** language ideology, Hawai‘i Creole, tattoos, multiethnic community, mobility and scale, linguistic anxiety

### Introduction

This paper explores representations of local identity in linguistic and cultural practices of tattoo-wearing community members in contemporary Hawai‘i through an investigation of the use of Hawai‘i Creole and local tattoos. I draw on sociological/anthropological notions of mobility and scale in relation to globalization and the physical movement of people across spaces (e.g., Blommaert, 2007, 2009; Blommaert, Collins, & Slembrouck, 2005). By mobility, it is meant both physical mobility of individuals as well the mobility of their culture and customs. I use it as a model for understanding the patterns of meaning that human societies create through hybridity, the complex flow of individuals and their cultural capital across shifting social landscapes (Greenblatt, 2010). The idea of sociolinguistic scale is

closely related to the concept of mobility and it becomes useful when considering changes in the weight of cultural values (including language) associated with a specific cultural practice in a community. For example, particularly since the annexation of 1898 and the increasing importance of English language brought by Caucasian political and economic rulers in Hawai‘i, the scale of American cultural practices such as Christianity, holidays, clothing and government has grown increasingly large. While Hawai‘i has been heavily affected by sociocultural practices from the continental United States, the cultural influence of its plantation immigrant population and the native culture have contributed significantly to the continuing cultural evolution. These practices change in size and scale over time in response to the overall cultural state of the society. In this paper, the idea of scale will be discussed as a consequence of mobility and contact experiences in post-plantation Hawai‘i.

In Hawai‘i, many cultures were brought into contact during the plantation period, which lasted from the mid-1800s through the early 1900s. The initially insular groups formed by the plantation workers eventually gave way to an inclusive immigrant community as their boundaries loosened through long-term sociocultural interaction. After more than a century of cultural and linguistic negotiation among residents, this pan-cultural scenario has come to be accepted by residents. While a suitable description of this phenomenon might be “post-mobility” — the local identity has become fixed after a marked decrease in the mobility that brought many disparate cultures into contact — the formation of local identity is still not separable from the ideas of mobility and scale. As Collins (2012, p. 197) explains:

scale is a concept for understanding the world as composed of stratified, layered units of differing size... [s]calar analysis does not require static conceptions of hierarchical order, that is, of ‘top-down’ causation in which larger- or higher-scale relations *always* prevail over smaller- or lower-scale relations (p. 198, emphasis original).

Social events may be examined on the micro-scale (local), macro-scale (global), or at an intermediate level. Linguistically, today’s Hawai‘i has two major languages shared by the majority of residents: English and Hawai‘i Creole. Local people negotiate their local and global identities by manipulating these two codes depending on sociolinguistic contexts (Hiramoto, 2011b). The concept of sociolinguistic scale suggested by Blommaert (2005, 2007) is useful to capture both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of linguistic variation in Hawai‘i. This is because there are situations where the relation between English and Hawai‘i Creole cannot be explained through the static conceptions of hierarchical order.

In all cases, these concepts identify the jump from one scale to another: from the individual to the collective, the temporally situated to the transtemporal, the unique to the common, the token to the type, the specific to the general. And the connection between such scales is indexical: it resides in the ways in which unique instances of communication can be captured (indexically) as "framed" understandable communication, pointing towards social and cultural norms, genres, traditions, expectations — phenomena of a higher scale-level (Blommaert 2007, p. 4).

Some scale relations pertain more to political and economic structures and processes while others have more of a cultural and discursive nature, involving socio-cultural classifications and linguistic forms (Collins & Slembrouck, 2009). Mobility instigates changes of scales within culturally specific value systems through cultural contact. For example, the mobility of texts is discussed as the concept of "moving text" (e.g., Blommaert, 2007, 2009; Kroon, Dong, & Blommaert, 2011), "text found in an unexpected space" (Pennycook, 2012), or "metrolingual art" (Jaworski 2014) within discussions of language and globalization. These works demonstrate how texts moving from one cultural setting to another index social and cultural norms that are not expected in a traditional sense. This paper explores representations of pan-cultural local identity in linguistic and cultural practices of community members of post-mobility Hawai'i through an investigation of the use of Hawai'i Creole and local tattoos. Today's local identity has been established among people of different racial and cultural heritages. Local-specific tattooed texts and images often reflect scale adjustments of the "moving" (or moved) cultural capitals that have been transferred to the local context from whatever original spaces and scales they belonged to.

Hawai'i is the newest of the United States's fifty states, and it is the only state made up completely of islands. The Hawaiian archipelago is physiographically and ethnologically part of the Polynesian subgroup of Oceania. As markers of identity, tattoos have long been a tradition within Oceanic societies, including Polynesia. Traditional Polynesian tattoo patterns are popular among locals today, regardless of their ethnicity; in addition, many locals have taken to tattooing distinctly Polynesian motifs that are not traditional tattoo patterns. Some examples include animal images (rays, sharks, geckos, turtles, etc.), maritime symbols (canoes, paddles, waves, hooks, etc.), gods and people, flowers and plants, etc., or symbols representing Hawai'i such as emblematic texts, maps of the archipelago or one of the islands, the state flag, the area code for Hawai'i (808), and so forth. While this trend is widespread in Hawai'i, it has to some extent also gained traction in the United States in general among people who feel a connection to Hawai'i, including tourists, short-time residents, military personnel, and others.

All in all, tattooing, formerly a sign of belonging to a particular group (e.g., native Pacific islanders following a traditional custom), has become more prominent in recent years (Sweetman, 1999, p. 53; Wagenvoord, 2006). The scope of the symbols used in tattoos in the United States has expanded considerably as the practice of wearing tattoos has expanded from limited subgroups (e.g., soldiers, “rebels,” etc.) to mainstream society as tattoos become part of pop culture. For example, more and more Americans are acquiring tattoos of tribal motifs and texts in non-roman scripts such as Chinese characters (Robbins, 2006). Non-roman script tattoos are a good example of moving text in a globalized society. As pop-cultural symbolic capital, celebrities’ and others’ Hebrew, Sanskrit, or Chinese tattoos can be seen as a global fashion trend in which the tattoo wearers’ races or the tattoos’ linguistic accuracy are irrelevant. In pop cultural ideas pertaining to the symbolic capital of “cool” (see Maher, 2005, 2010), the linguistic accuracy (or inaccuracy) of the non-romanized scripts in tattoos is not a focus because they mainly function as fodder for cultural consumption in the name of global fashion (Maher, 2010). Linguistically inaccurate non-romanized tattoos have become rampant, and examples of a large number of them are easily found through a cursory internet search.

When it comes to traditional Polynesian tattoos, each symbol can have intricate meanings and even be designated for a specific wearer. Therefore, if one does not know the symbolic meanings behind such tattoos, one can make the mistake of wearing designs that are unsuitable in ways that extend beyond linguistic inaccuracy. To many people who are committed to Hawai‘i, traditional Polynesian tattoos are not part of the capital of cool. It is important to remember that these people who are committed to Hawai‘i are not just people of Hawaiian ancestry. While the indigenous population rapidly decreased after the arrival of European explorers and immigrant workers, mixed populations increased drastically (Kawamoto, 1993). With this mixing came the integration of one culture’s practices with the others, including the acceptability of tattoos and the symbols employed in their use, and their acceptance as a marker of local community membership. Indeed, a majority of Hawai‘i locals are of mixed heritage, and it is these people who are often wary of the mistreatment of both traditional Hawaiian tattoos and motifs that are emblematic of Hawai‘i. This is because the practices of local tattoos are still considered to be the property of the local community — and not of a global one. Mobility created the modern community of Hawai‘i locals (including non-Hawaiians), and Hawaiian tattoo practices have diffused to the local community in the post-(plantation) mobility era. In this paper, I will show how locals use local tattoos and Hawai‘i Creole to set boundaries between non-locals and locals. Locals distinguish local tattooing practices from global fashion practices; moreover, they police who “deserves” to have local tattoos based on looks and language use.

## Historical mobility and contemporary local identity

The year 1778 marked the arrival of Captain James Cook, after which the islands began to gain economic importance to the West; various non-Polynesian groups began to arrive for commercial purposes such as sandalwood trading and whaling (Kawamoto, 1993). The rate of immigration only increased after 1835 and the establishment of the first sugar plantation in a soon-to-be thriving industry; from 1852 to 1897 nearly 40,000 Chinese plantation laborers (mostly Cantonese speaking) arrived in Hawai'i. From 1878 to 1913, 23,000 Portuguese laborers came to Hawai'i; between 1885 and 1924, 200,000 Japanese immigrants arrived; and 100,000 Filipino workers immigrated to the islands in the period between 1907 and 1930, which roughly marks the end of the Hawaiian plantation immigration period (Sakoda & Siegel, 2003). In addition to these most prominent groups of immigrants, others from all over the world, including ones from other Pacific islands, Korea, Europe, and South America, contributed to a steadily diversifying local population (Lind, 1938). First generation immigrants, staying for long periods of time, often eventually became unwilling or unable to return to the homelands, and formed diasporic communities in Hawai'i centered on their plantation camps. These communities continued to grow and eventually merged with one another. The laborers' children, most of whom had never visited their ethnic homelands, began to integrate themselves into the local community and came to consider Hawai'i their true home.

Because of this diversity, unlike most other parts of the United States, Hawai'i lacks any clearly numerically dominant ethnic group. The resulting society gives rise to Hawai'i's well-deserved status as the "melting pot" of the Pacific for its diversity and the wide-ranging acceptance that members of any one culture show toward their neighbors, and lends itself to descriptive metaphors such as "mixed plate lunch," a local meal including several dishes served together on the same plate. Whether and to what extent such idealistic metaphors reflect the actual social dynamics is debatable, but contemporary Hawai'i is undoubtedly rich with the symbolism and traditions of the constituent cultures and is understood by its residents to have a unique local culture. The local culture is deeply affiliated with a notion of local identity, which is described by an ethnic studies specialist, Okamura (1994), as follows:

[L]ocal identity is based on the categorical opposition between groups considered Local and those considered non-Local, including haole [Caucasian], immigrants, the military, tourists, and foreign investors. Local is essentially a relative category; groups and individuals are viewed or view themselves as local in relation to others who are not so perceived. From this perspective, local identity is very exclusive rather than all inclusive and serves to create and maintain social boundaries between groups. (p. 165)

This paper focuses on markers of local identity, including the ubiquitous Polynesian, Asian, and local symbolism found in local tattoos, and on Hawai'i Creole, the distinctly local dialect that mixes aspects of languages of many local immigrant cultures.

### ***Kama'āina* identity and Hawai'i Creole**

For reasons related to the symbolic capital of “cool,” traditional Polynesian designs and Chinese character tattoos have become a common trope among tattoo wearers in the United States in general, as mentioned earlier. However, Hawai'i locals who feel they have a more direct connection with these symbols have the tendency to separate themselves from the global “cool” culture by justifying their tattooing as part of “local” culture and not just trendy symbolism. For example, they claim that their non-roman text tattoos such as Chinese, Japanese, or Filipino represent their emotional or physical affiliations with their heritages. Similarly, the locals also consider their Polynesian tattoos to be more legitimate than those worn by non-locals because Polynesian motifs represent their *kama'āina* or Hawai'i resident identity. Like the locally spoken language, Hawai'i Creole, locally recognized tattoos function as identity markers of those who belong to Hawai'i. It must be remembered that although Hawai'i is part of the United States, its geographic and cultural isolation from the mainland makes the distinction between local and non-local particularly important to residents. The *kama'āina* population includes both locally born and long-time Hawai'i residents; the word comes from the Hawaiian language *kama* ‘child’ and *āina* ‘land’ (Hiramoto, 2011a). Participation in local cultural practices is usually limited to these people, but tourism is extremely important to the state's economy and a vast number of visitors arrive at the islands every day. Hence, unspoken boundaries are often set up between locals and non-locals among Hawai'i residents. The demarcations between locals and non-locals are constantly monitored and negotiated through individuals' measurable local attributes; at the same time, such measurements are usually based on self-definitions of different individuals.

The notion of Hawai'i local culture is predicated on the coexistence of Hawai'i's many constituent cultures. Often, Hawai'i-born Americans prefer to forego identification with ethnic terms such as “Hawaiian-American” or “Asian-American,” and instead opt to label themselves as simply “local.” That the term “local” does not single out any particular culture or ethnicity is telling, as indeed many of the cultural practices from the wide variety of ethnic groups comprising Hawai'i's population have been adopted by residents as their own, with little regard to ethnic “boundaries,” and similarly, the general term “local” posits membership in each of

the specific ethnic groups found in Hawai'i (see Okamura, 1994). As such, a resident of Japanese ancestry need not be limited to claiming legitimacy with regards to Japanese culture alone; through her identification as a local, she may claim the right to appropriate Chinese, Filipino, or native Hawaiian culture in the construction of her identity. In this sense, given the myriad ethnicities present, it becomes apparent that the requirements for local status must be more than simply heritage language and ethnicity. Hawai'i-born historian John Rosa makes the claim that local identity is "a matter of positioning oneself in relationship to power and place" (2000, p. 101). In everyday communication among locals, a central aspect of negotiating this position is the use of Hawai'i Creole, which functions not only as the homegrown lingua franca, but also as a token of one's authentic community membership status.

For the *kama'āina* population, even an acrolectal use of Hawai'i Creole or an ability to comprehend Hawai'i Creole can function as a token to mark locals as distinct from Others, because the language transmits a local quality transparent among themselves. Moreover, it helps to identify *kama'āina* members in a way not accessible to outsiders. Although there are differences between locally born and transplanted *kama'āina* within the community, they are not relevant to the central arguments of the analysis in this particular study; thus, I use *kama'āina* and Hawai'i local interchangeably to mean a group of people who share the local culture.

## Data and methodology

As mentioned earlier, this study is concerned with the concept of "mobility," as well as mobility's consequences. The physical mobility and relocation of people result in linguistic and cultural contact and leave traces of their heritages in newly created linguistic and cultural components. From personal observations in time spent in Hawai'i, I came to understand that local tattoo wearers display part of their identity by projecting their links to their heritage or affiliation to Polynesian culture. In order to obtain empirical data and to investigate the significance of local tattoos as a social phenomenon, interviews were conducted with 21 local tattoo wearers (11 females and 10 males) between January and May in Honolulu in 2012. Flyers calling for volunteer "local tattoo wearers" were distributed at a local university campus to find interviewees. As a result, the majority of the participants ( $n=12$ ) were students, while the rest of the participants were people who heard about the study from people connected to the university ( $n=9$ ). The interviewees' ages were between 18 and 46, but about half of them ( $n=12$ ) were under 30, as many undergraduate students volunteered to participate. Out of 21 people, only

three had a single tattoo while 19 had more than two. Those who just had one tattoo were all teenagers (two 18-year-old females, one 19-year-old male) at the time of the interview, and they all mentioned that they had plans to add more in the future because they thought one was not enough. From the interview data, I found that the participants generally had multiple tattoos, which coincided with my personal observations prior to the study. All of the interviewees said that they were content with their tattoos except for one female who had a total of five tattoos. She wished to remove two of her tattoos that she had made herself when she was in middle school because they had faded and did not look good to her anymore.

In the interviews, the participants were asked to discuss topics such as the meanings of their own tattoos, their reasons for choosing them, and their thoughts on their own tattoos and those of others including other local people as well as non-locals. Interviews were conducted by Gavin, a native Hawai'i Creole speaking researcher, at his office on campus during office hours, and each session took approximately 30 minutes. Those who agreed to do so had their tattoos photographed at the end of the interview session. Gavin is a tattoo wearer himself and has profound knowledge about local tattoo practices as well as local cultural information. Gavin's local affiliation as well as his openness towards tattoos were crucial parts of the interview process, especially because this can be a controversial topic, as presented in the excerpts in the following sections.

The interview data show that tattoo wearers, especially those with multiple tattoos, use their tattoos to project their integrated multicultural identities in personal and symbolic forms. The data also indicate that boundaries between locals and non-locals are often determined by skin colors (Caucasians vs. non-Caucasians) and language use (English vs. Hawai'i Creole). Hawai'i Creole can serve to create a distinct local identity as "marked identities are also ideologically associated with marked language: linguistic structures or practices that differ from the norm" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 372). In the following section, I will discuss how Hawai'i Creole is treated as a linguistic variety reserved for locals, and how it becomes an important factor in the projection of a distinct local identity.

### **Local symbolism as boundary marker: Hawai'i Creole**

While tattoos are expressive and highly symbolic, they are limited in many respects: by their visibility, the limited "canvas" space they may utilize, and by the type of people who would choose to acquire tattoos in the first place. Hawai'i Creole, in contrast, is a much more common marker of local identity and also serves the paralinguistic function of informing listeners of one's knowledge of local cultural practices and customs. Today, Hawai'i Creole has supplanted heritage

languages like Hawaiian, Portuguese, Cantonese, Japanese, or Tagalog to become the common default code of locals who share Pacific island and/or plantation immigrant heritage.

In the interview data, participants commonly mentioned that one's localness is strongly judged by their ability to speak Hawai'i Creole. Readers are reminded that self-identifying as local was one of the requirements to participate in the interview. In several interviews, the interviewer began with an inquiry about participants' localness such as "do you identify yourself as (Hawai'i) local?" Most of them responded with forthright affirmative answers as follows. The information in parentheses after the interviewees' pseudonyms indicates their age, gender, occupation, and ethnicity. "Yeah, definitely" (Aileen, 24, female, student, Japanese/Scottish/Irish/Cherokee); "Yes, I would, because ah, I was born and raised here" (Gaby, 25, male, student, Filipino); "Yes, absolutely" (Kerry, 29, female, student, Japanese/Caucasian); "Ya, born and raised" (Kyle, 43, male, mechanic, Hawaiian/Portuguese).

While most of the participants acknowledged their local identity when asked about it, there was a small group of those who admitted their local identity rather hesitantly. They explained that their hesitation was due to lacking confidence in speaking Hawai'i Creole. In the interview recordings, however, all participants used at least some characteristics of Hawai'i Creole that are distinctive from Standard English, however acrolectal they sounded. Such characteristics included lexical items as well as some phonological features like monophthongization of diphthongs ([ej]/[ou] > [ɛ]/[o]), replacement of interdental fricatives ([θ]/[ð] > [t]/[d]), and a contour intonation (rising and falling) of interrogatives. These phonological features may be relatively unnoticed by speakers themselves unless they are students of linguistics. More salient features will be syntactic or morphological, as these are the features, rather than the phonological ones, that usually get highlighted when Hawai'i Creole is discussed in public, such as in educational discussions or in media. The presence or absence of these phonological features will not be marked in the data presentation of this paper because they are beyond the scope of the present work. Excerpts 1 and 2 below show examples where the interviewees hesitate to ascribe local identity to themselves due to a limitation in speaking Hawai'i Creole (widely known as Pidgin in Hawai'i).

Excerpt 1, Terri (30, female, student, Hawaiian/Hispanic)

1. Gavin: ... First, do you identify yourself as local?
2. Terri: (.) I don't know (.) that's an interesting question.
3. Uhm (.) yeah I think °I guess°.
4. Gavin: Okay, now I, I'm just kind of curious, why the "I
5. guess".

6. Terri: (laughs) Um, because there's (.) there's so many  
 7. definitions of the term local?  
 8. Gavin: Exactly, yeah  
 9. Terri: (laughs) that you know (.) it (.) it differs from  
 11. person to person even from um certain community  
 12. groups  
 11. Gavin: Oh yeah, mm:hm.  
 12. Terri: of what local means (.) And so, I consider myself  
 13. local but everyone thinks that I'm *haole* because I  
 14. don't look Hawaiian (.) at all (laughs) AND I [speak  
 15. English: (.) so  
 15. Gavin: (laughs)  
 16. Terri: they all think I'm from the mainland somewhere.

Excerpts 2, Regina (19, female, student, Filipino/Caucasian)

1. Gavin: ... Do you identify yourself as local?  
 2. Regina: Mm, yes, m because I'm, I'm born and raised here but  
 3. (.) I don't feel, like I am, a part of like the local  
 4. identity? I don't really I don't speak Pidgin, and  
 5. uh (.) I recognize that it's a language it's not (.)  
 6. broken English or whatever, but I don't spe:- (.) all  
 7. my relatives speak it, well my Filipino relatives.  
 8. Gavin: But you can understand it when you hear it right?  
 9. Regina: Yeah. Oh definitely.  
 10. Gavin: Yeah.  
 11. Regina: I jus- (.) I don't really speak it. Uh, partly  
 12. because I don't feel really confident (.) also  
 13. because, I don't feel really comfortable with it.

Both excerpts show the interviewees' hesitation to call themselves local, as seen in Terri's comment "yeah, I think, I guess" (Excerpt 1, line 3), and Regina's "I don't feel, like I am, a part of like the local identity?" (Excerpt 2, lines 3–4). Mixed race or ethnicity is very common in Hawai'i, as immigrants from different areas started to intermarry fairly early on. However, marriages between Caucasians (often called *haole* from the Hawaiian language) and Asians/Pacific Islanders were not so common until after World War II. Although there are people who are considered local *haoles*, *kama'aina haoles* 'resident Caucasians', or local *hapa haoles* 'half Caucasians', Caucasians are typically excluded from a default local membership (see Okamura, 1994, p. 165, quoted above). Thus, the word *haole*, as opposed to local or *kama'aina*, more often than not denotes outsiders like people from the mainland United States. The contrast of "local vs. *haole*" is often used to illustrate polar

opposites in a connection to Hawai‘i and Hawaiian culture by locals. Localness is projected through one’s skin color and linguistic codes, placing darker skinned locals and Hawai‘i Creole speakers at one end, and fair skinned English-speaking *haoles* at the opposite end.

Terri states that while she considers herself local, her appearance as well as her use of (Standard) English often leads others to believe she is a *haole* from the mainland (lines 13–15). This sense of exclusion that Terri describes may be the reason why she has to self-define her localness as one of the many possible definitions of “local.” This is because, through her experiences, Terri herself came to admit that she does not fit a mainstream description of a local figure. Labrador’s (2004) following statements describe a generalized consensus of what it takes to be local in today’s local community:

Depending on the sociohistorical context and actors involved, Local can index racialized bodies (“look Local”), cultural identities (“act Local”), linguistic affiliations (“talk Local”), and political positionings. In this way, the boundaries of Local are constantly changing and continuously policed through processes of self-definition and othering. (p. 297)

Terri’s explanation about her localness is due to her lack of confidence in “looking” and “talking” like a local. Likewise, Regina in Excerpt 2 mentions that her incompetence in speaking Hawai‘i Creole disqualifies her from having full-fledged local identity. As Regina discusses in lines 9 and 11–13, although she does understand it, she also knows her constraints in speaking it, and her lack of speaking ability makes her feel less local than those who speak it. All in all, in the data, those who felt less confident in speaking Hawai‘i Creole all mentioned that they felt that their local identity was less solid compared to those who speak it. I will come back to Labrador’s (2004) account of the three emblematic elements associated with localness — looking, acting, and speaking — when discussing the data in which locals show processes of policing and self-defining the local versus non-local boundary in terms of tattooing practices.

### **Polynesian-inspired tattoos and local identity**

Most of the interviewees mentioned that their tattoos represented who they are and also that their tattoos are part of their identity. Participants often had tattoos such as words and motifs that display their connections to Hawai‘i. In this section, representative data exemplifying a strong affiliation toward their place of origin — Hawai‘i — will be presented. In the following excerpt, Missy is asked about a tattoo of her nickname, Island Girl.

Excerpt 3, Missy (43, female, cashier, Hawaiian/Filipino/Portuguese/Irish.)

1. Gavin: Was there, was there any particular reason for the
2.           nickname on the back of the neck?
3. Missy: I just wanted to represent who I was and where I came
4.           from.
5. Gavin: Oh, okay.
6. Missy: ISLAND GIRL, from THE ISLAND.



Figure 1. Missy's tattoo in Excerpt 3

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As a part Hawaiian, Missy's roots are indeed set in Hawai'i, and her sense of a strong local attachment emerges in her comments (lines 3–4) along with the meaning of the nickname tattoo. In fact, different tattoo wearers routinely commented that their tattoos represent their identity. Moreover, by displaying Hawai'i-related words and motifs, a number of tattoo wearers claimed their affiliation with their homeland of Hawai'i regardless of their races or heritages. In the next excerpt, an interviewee from Maui, Danny, describes his tattoo that has typical Polynesian triangles and wave patterns. Danny has been an avid Hawaiian-style canoe paddler since his childhood, and the tattoo is taken from the logo of his canoe club in Kahului, Maui. For him, having this Hawaiian-inspired tattoo signifies his affiliation to the canoe club and identity as a member of the club. The logo is based on traditional Hawaiian/Polynesian motifs as it honors a Hawaiian canoe culture.

Excerpt 4, Danny (25, male, student, English/German/Scottish/Japanese/Chinese/Hawaiian)

1. Danny: One thing, the canoe club insignia over here, the
2.           white mountain is ah (.) geografilly
3. Gavin: °Geografica-°
4. Danny: Geo:-, geographically represented is ah, you have the
5.           two mountains, you have the valley in between, so the
6.           valley isle. Ah, so actually we have the two
7.           mountains here, West Maui mountain and Haleakala, ah,

8. in the middle, this is our *hale*, our canoe club  
 9. because we’re located in right in Kahului, right in  
 10. Kahului harbor.

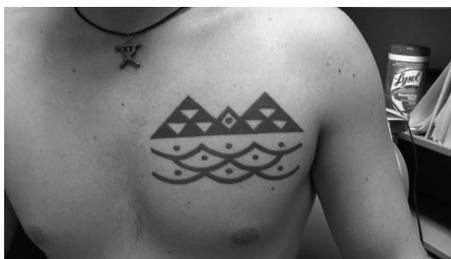


Figure 2. Danny’s tattoo in Excerpt 4

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Racially, Danny is not solely Polynesian, but he chooses to display his local identity through the Hawaiian-design tattoo as he puts forward his position as a member of the canoe club. When describing general geographic information depicted in the tattoo, Danny uses an unmarked second-person pronoun ‘you’ as in “you have the two mountains, you have the valley in between, so the valley isle” (lines 4–5). In this comment, Danny explains how a part of the tattoo represents the valley isle, which is Maui’s nickname. When he starts describing a different part of the tattoo representing his canoe club, he switches to a first-person pronominal form to mark his attachment as in “our *hale* ‘house, building’, our canoe club” (lines 8). In short, Danny’s Hawaiian tattoo claims his local membership as represented by the Hawaiian activity of canoeing that he participates in, and this indicates a strong sense of belonging to his homeland.

Another interviewee who is of non-Polynesian/Hawaiian origin, Andy, also shows his commitment to his local affiliation as well as his membership in today’s Hawai‘i community through his tattoos. Although ethnically non-Hawaiian, Andy commented that his local identity is based on his appreciation of Hawaiian/Polynesian cultures when he was asked if he identifies as local at the beginning of the interview.

Excerpt 5a, Andy (23, male, student, Chinese/Korean/Filipino)

1. Gavin: Um, do you identify yourself as local?  
 2. Andy: I believe so. (.) I believe because, um, I love  
 3. Hawai‘i. I believe I understand to some degree the  
 4. culture of the *kanaka maoli*. Um, I: (.) and since I  
 5. lived the majority of my life, was born here ...

Andy connects his sense of local identity with the understanding of the *kanaka maoli* 'Hawaiian: native Hawaiian' through his experiences as a person who was born in Hawai'i and spent the majority of his life there (lines 3–5). The fact that Andy uses the term *kanaka maoli* demonstrates his knowledge about the Hawaiian language and culture, as it is not commonly used among regular local people, while the word *kanaka* 'Hawaiian man' is locally known to refer to Hawaiian people. Andy, a Pacific archeology major, indeed revealed an impressive amount of understanding about the cultures and traditions of the Oceanic regions including Polynesia and Melanesia during the interview. He has conducted fieldwork on various Pacific islands such as Vanuatu, Rapanui (Easter Island), and Tahiti. Later in the interview, Andy expounds upon the tattoos on his right arm with their detailed designs that combine traditional tattoo symbols of different parts of the Pacific.

Excerpt 5b, Andy (23, male, student, Chinese/Korean/Filipino)

6. Andy: This one is very, this one is pretty complex. I don't  
 7. know where to begin for this one. I have to just  
 8. explain, like, this middle part is Tahitian, all  
 9. Tahitian symbols.  
 10. Gavin: Mm:hm.  
 11. Andy: This part is Filipino, and also in Micronesia present  
 12. too.  
 ...  
 13. Andy: Ah, this is the *nihō māno*, um in Hawaiian, Hawaiian  
 14. symbols, the sharks' teeth. And, I'm still  
 15. explaining, the Filipino borders represent, like, my  
 16. Filipino heritage. Cause um I was, I didn't, I didn't  
 17. really know much about  
 18. Gavin: Um.  
 19. Andy: Filipino herit – like [heritage.  
 20. Gavin: [When

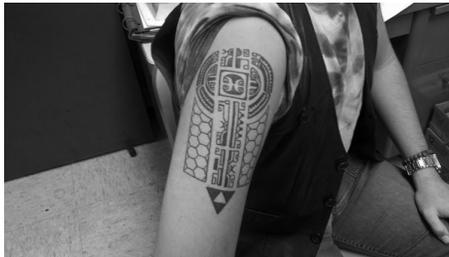


Figure 3. Andy's tattoo in Excerpt 5b

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21. Andy: I was also like researching, I didn't even know that  
 22. they, they had a tattooing art form, but in, in the  
 23. Philippines this is called *ufug* and it means  
 24. centipede scales, and it's a kind of talisman for  
 25. protection.

From his comments, it is clear that Andy has a fair amount of knowledge about tattoos of the Pacific islands. After briefly mentioning the Tahitian designs in line 8–9, he explains that the pattern in his Filipino-inspired tattoo is also found in Micronesia (line 8–9). He then goes on to explain the Hawaiian motifs of *niho māno* ‘sharks’ teeth’ in lines 13–14. Andy also explains his Filipino *ufug* ‘centipede scale’ pattern tattoo (lines 22–24) while referring to his Filipino heritage (lines 15–16). In the following excerpts, Andy continues to explain the Tahitian and Hawaiian parts of the same tattoo:

Excerpt 5c, Andy (23, male, student, Chinese/Korean/Filipino)

19. Andy: Um it's actually, this whole thing is, actually  
 20. represents a very abstract, stylized coconut tree,  
 21. Gavin: Kay.  
 22. Andy: And this root here is the *niho māno*, my root is from  
 23. Hawai'i, that's where [I live].  
 24. Gavin: [Uh:huh  
 25. Andy: And this is the coconut tree, and I'm at the, at the  
 26. crown, I guess, kind of  
 27. Gavin: Mm:huh  
 28. Andy: growing out.  
 ...  
 29. Andy: This is kind of like, no matter where I go in the  
 30. world, I'm always connected to Hawai'i, this, through  
 31. this, you know this coconut tree.

In Excerpt 5c, Andy tells a story about the Polynesian tattoo symbols he wears, associating the abstract coconut tree (line 20) with his position as a Hawai'i local (“my root is from Hawai'i, that's where I live,” lines 22–23) who is committed to his local identity (“no matter where I go in the world, I'm always connected to Hawai'i,” lines 29–30). Furthermore, through the tattoo that Andy calls “complex” in Excerpt 5b, line 6, he represents his hybrid local identity — racially Chinese, Korean, and Filipino, yet claiming to be rooted in Hawai'i.

## Policing boundaries

As seen in the previous section, local tattoos are used by local people to claim local identity regardless of their race. Hawaiian or Polynesian inspired tattoos are considered default local symbolism, and having these tattoos creates indexical emblems (i.e., Blommaert, 200, p.4) in the local community. In other words, the tattoos that signify one's affiliation and commitment to Hawai'i become part of the "emblematic scale" of local identity as they are one of the methods for locals to display their shared identity (see Reyes, 2013). Comparing the iconic symbolism of the American and Hawaiian flags, the former's scale is generally larger since it appeals and resonates with a larger audience. However, the Hawaiian flag design can have a larger emblematic scale to those who have a strong attachment to Hawai'i. Other than traditional Hawaiian/Polynesian tattoo patterns, there are several other motifs that are considered stereotypically local. Most of them are considered to represent cultural values of the major plantation immigrant groups. For example, it was common for interviewees to suggest Japanese/Chinese name tattoos in *kanji* or Chinese orthography as representative local tattoos. These local tattoos are often perceived as an embodiment of cultural identity among local community members (Hiramoto 2014). Local tattoos function as the "acting local" part of self-defining and policing of boundaries between local and non-local. The data tell us that local tattoos are seen in a positive light when worn by *kama'āinas*; they function as a token of proud displays of one's identity. On the other hand, by and large, local tattoos worn by non-*kama'āinas* were perceived negatively by locals. This relates to Labrador's (2004) three criteria for self-defining and Othering of local vs. non-local: "looking local (racialized bodies)," "acting local (cultural identities)," or "talking local (linguistic affiliations)." For the interviewees, a mismatch is created when those who do not index their localness through their looks ("looking local") engage in behavior that indexes cultural identities, such as having local tattoos ("acting local"). The following excerpts are representative opinions of how the interview participants, both males and females, feel about obvious non-locals' local-looking tattoos.

Excerpt 6, Gaby (25, male, student, Filipino)

1. I wanna like, you know, kinda questioning, um, like, wanna
2. wanna get to ask that person, you know, °you know°, how
3. they go (xxx) stuff like that, but at at the same time, you
4. you always have that you know like, that prejudice like
5. kind of mentality °like you know, so it's° for example it's
6. like a *haole*, you know, getting ah, like have like a whole
7. intricate tribal Polynesian piece (.) like 'HMM:?! (.) you
8. know, it's like 'oka:y'?! (.) ah, yeah, it's like ...

Excerpt 7, Abby (22, female, student, Filipino)

1. Abby: Like I said, a tattoo is there forever, and you
2. really gotta know the meaning behind it, even um (.)
3. as far as I know, with Polynesian tattoos even each
4. design has a, has a meaning.
5. Gavin: Totally, yeah.
6. Abby: Um (.) like um, like sometimes *haoles* have the the
7. [*kanji*]
8. Gavin: [Mm-hm, yeah yeah yeah (xxx)]
9. Abby: like what if it's, you know, it could mean something
10. else so I, I don't know, I'm not I'm not, I don't
11. want to hate, but I'm like [I'm not really for it.
12. Gavin [I totally understand it's
13. (xxx), yeah, yeah
14. Abby: (xxx) Gotta be careful about that stuff.

In Excerpt 6, Gaby comments on local tattoos worn by non-locals that “you always have that ... prejudice like kind of mentality” (lines 4–5). His use of an unmarked pronoun ‘you’ suggests that, at least to him, prejudice against non-locals wearing local tattoos is an unmarked reaction and shared sentiment in the *kamaāina* community. He also states, “it’s like a *haole*, you know, getting ah, like have like a whole intricate tribal Polynesian piece like ‘hmm?!’” (lines 5–7). In this comment, Gaby treats *haole* ‘Caucasian’ as an exemplary non-local by suggesting that a *haole*’s embodiment of an intricate Polynesian tattoo is a questionable phenomenon. In Excerpt 7, Abby also posits a *haole* as a prototypical figure who decides to wear local tattoos such as Polynesian motifs or *kanji* orthography without understanding their meanings (lines 6–7). Like Gaby with the phrase, “prejudice kind of mentality,” Abby also describes an intense reaction against non-locals’ local tattoos as she says “I don’t want to hate but I’m like, I’m not really for it” (line 11). As seen in Gaby’s and Abby’s statements, local tattoo wearers were generally sensitive to non-locals’ uses of local tattoos and reacted to them as if they were acts of violation against locals.

A similar example can be seen in Kerry’s interview data in Excerpt 8. She states that although she does not want to judge, seeing non-local people wearing local tattoos makes her think “you don’t deserve to put that on you” because “that symbolizes so much to people here” (lines 2–3).

Excerpt 8, Kerry (21, female, student, Japanese/Caucasian)

1. Kerry: I, I mean, I try not to judge (.) but a little part
2. of me inside is thinking, ‘°you don’t deserve to put
3. that on you°, that symbolizes SO: MUCH to people

4. HERE' you know
- ...
5. Kerry: They always get those questionable looks, 'WHY WOULD
6. YOU EVER DO THAT?!' You know, like ah (°laughs°), I
7. notice a lot of, ah, a lot of °ha:ole° people, they
8. tend to like wanna be like 'OH YEAH, I'm totally
9. LO:CAL and it's all good and', you know these are the
10. ones that can tan really well so they kind of look
11. like it.
12. Gavin: Mm:huh.
13. Kerry: But oh when they open their mouths, it's just like
14. whoa, where are you from?
15. Gavin: (°laughs°)
16. Kerry: Wait, you look so (.) local, and you have the tattoo
17. and [everything
18. Gavin: [when they open their mouths
19. Kerry: you can put it up when you pu-, you just ope-, you
20. SO:UND [TERRIBLE!
21. Gavin: [(laughs)
22. Kerry: (°laughs°) In regards to your tattoos and like you're
23. [jus-
24. Gavin: [There's a big misguidance
25. Kerry: Oh, IT REALLY IS! It throws you off a lot of times!
26. You think you kno:w, you can tell by how somebody
27. looks, but I mean (.)...

Kerry uses a number of self-quotative speeches in this portion of the interview, as if she were speaking to non-locals with local tattoos. In the quotative speech, she highlights the agency of a non-local with local tattoos with a pronoun 'you.' Examples include "Why would you ever do that?!" (lines 5–6), "whoa, where are you from?! You look so local and you have the tattoo and everything" (line 14 and 16–17), "You can put it up" (line 19), "you sound terrible" (line 20), and "In regards to your tattoos and like you're jus-" (lines 22–23). After these quotes from line 14 on, Kerry starts using 'you' as an unmarked pronoun to refer to people in general including herself. People in general in this case are those whom Kerry considers unspecified, that is, local people. For example, "It throws you off a lot of times!" (line 25) refers to local people who are made to believe non-locals to be locals because of their tans and local tattoos. Kerry's comments demonstrate her frustration over non-locals who can pass as locals by "looking" (tanned skin) and "acting" (local tattoos) like locals as if they are trying to deceive her about their local identity. The deception fails when these people do not "sound" local despite their looks

and acts; as a result, they just "sound terrible." This mismatch appears deceptive to a real local like Kerry, and thus creates a reason for "questionable looks" (line 5).

Like Gaby and Abby in the earlier examples, Kerry's comments also highlight that *haoles'* local tattoos are something to be perceived with disappointment. While Gaby and Abby were not racially Caucasians, Kerry is half Japanese and half Caucasian. Nonetheless, Kerry separates herself from *haoles'* 'Caucasians' in the interview. While positioning herself as a local community member ("I try not to judge but ... that symbolizes so much to people here," lines 1–4), she reflects on her experience as a local and mentions *haoles'* as classic outsiders. She even mocks *haoles'*: "a lot of *haole* people, they tend to like wanna be like 'Oh yeah, I'm totally local and it's all good and'" (lines 8–9). Earlier in this paper, in Excerpt 1, a Hispanic/Hawaiian interviewee, Terry, shared her feeling of discomfort about fitting into one overarching definition of local because she felt that she was not a model local figure due to the way she looks and speaks. She said, "I consider myself local but everyone thinks that I'm *haole* because I don't look Hawaiian at all. And I speak English so they all think I'm from the mainland somewhere" (Excerpt 1, lines 10–14). In Terry's perception, her fellow local people mistake her for non-local because of her Caucasian looks and Standard English-like speech. According to Labrador's (2004) descriptions of localness, typical *haoles'* looks do not index racialized bodies; however, as described by Kerry, their bodies can sometimes pass the "looking local" test ("these are the ones that can tan really well so they kind of look like it" Excerpt 8, lines 9–11). Moreover, the *haoles'* under discussion in Kerry's interview not only embody localness by the way they look, but also index cultural identities through local tattoos and appear to be "acting local" ("Wait, you look so local, and you have the tattoo and everything" lines 16–17). For these reasons, when they speak something other than the expected code, Hawai'i Creole, they fail all the more to prove their localness and invoke a strong reaction for being "fake," whether appearing local was their intention or not ("when they open their mouths, it's just like 'whoa, where are you from?'" lines 13–14; "you sound terrible!" line 19–20). All in all, these interviewees' opinions about local tattoos demonstrate that the boundaries of localness are indeed constantly changing and locals are continuously policing these boundaries through processes of self-defining and monitoring degrees of otherness, as observed by Labrador (2004, p. 297).

## Conclusion

With this paper, I have touched upon how cultural discourses have been shaped and shared by today's local people through discussions of their local identity as projected through the symbolism included in tattoos. A scale is an arbitrary

measure of the closeness or distance, conceptually but possibly also physically, between two objects or locations or even two more abstract features such as social norms or popular ideals. Blommaert (2007), discussing mobility and language, explains that “social events and processes move and develop on a continuum of layered scales, with the strictly local (micro) and the global (macro) as extremes, and with several intermediary scales (e.g., the level of the State) in between” (Blommaert, 2007, p. 1). By moving through spaces, people learn to adjust to new environments as they pass through the boundaries set by these scales. These scales are emblematic or iconic (Agha, 2011, Reyes, 2013) and they index individuals’ personhood such as identity. First generation plantation immigrants established separate diasporic communities in Hawai‘i. These communities continued to grow with the flourishing plantation industry and slowly merged with other groups in the area. Immigrants’ children integrated themselves into a local community along with the native Hawaiians and the children of other immigrants, came to consider themselves as belonging to this new homeland, as newly established locals who no longer belonged to their ancestors’ countries. In other words, for descendants of the immigrants as well as descendants of native Hawaiians, hybrid identity became the default category: hybridity of race, of cultural practices, and of language became commonplace. As such, over the course of time, *kama‘āina* members incorporating both native Hawaiians and others committed to Hawai‘i developed a new and *lasting* social configuration in which what they recognized as local was not restricted to traditional Hawaiian/Polynesian practices.

While studies of the immigration history of Hawai‘i have addressed some issues concerning different immigrant groups’ and their descendants’ cultural practices, many dimensions of this intense and prolonged cultural interaction have been little discussed and are little understood. The data show that Hawai‘i’s political and social contexts help to unite local people through emblematic identity markers — Hawai‘i Creole, local tattoos, and distinctively recognizable “local” racialized bodies. Especially after first generation immigrants started settling in Hawai‘i for good, various systems of cultural knowledge started mixing as they were passed down from different racial groups in the community to the next generations of locals. As a result, local emblems reflect what is distinctive as much as what is shared in the different characteristics of plantation immigrants and native Hawaiians. Through the interview data with tattoo wearers and self-identified locals, it has been shown that over the course of time, formerly distinctive cultural practices transformed into today’s negotiated realizations of communication (e.g., Hawai‘i Creole) and cultural practices (e.g., local tattoos).

## Transcription symbols

:	tone stretch	(laughs)	laughing sounds
(.)	pause	(xxx)	inaudible utterance
.	falling tone	abc-	uncompleted words
?	rising tone	[	overlaps
!	animated tone	CAPS	heavy emphasis
°abcd°	lowered tone		

## Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge the financial and institutional support given to this project by the National University of Singapore FRC Research Grant (AY2012-15). My sincere thanks also go to the University of Hawai‘i, Department of Linguistics and the Charlene Sato Center for Pidgin, Creole and Dialect Studies, for their administrative support for this project. I sincerely thank the journal’s editors, anonymous reviewers, Joseph Park, and Kira Hall for their invaluable assistance. I am greatly indebted to the following individuals for their invaluable help and encouragement at various stages of this project: Laurie Durand, Katie Drager, Benjamin George, Christina Higgins, Adam Jaworski, Kenneth Rehg, Kent Sakoda, and Lionel Wee. Finally, I wish to express my gratitude for the study participants for their data and commentary, and to Gavin Furukawa for his invaluable assistance.

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*Author's address*

Mie Hiramoto  
Department of English Language & Literature  
National University of Singapore  
AS5, 7 Arts Link  
SINGAPORE 17570  
Singapore  
mieh@hawaii.edu