

Hawaiian Creole English and Caucasian Identity

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I. INTRODUCTION

Hawaiian Creole English, commonly known as Pidgin, is widely spoken in Hawaii. In 2015, it was recognized by the US Census Bureau as a third official language of Hawaii, following English and Hawaiian (Laddaran, 2015). Pidgin is distinct and separate from Hawaii English (Drager, 2012), which is also widely spoken in Hawaii but not recognized as an official language of the state.

Pidgin arose among immigrant groups on the pineapple plantations and was the dominant language of the workers' children by the 1920's (Tamura, 1993). Historically, an ability to speak Pidgin established one as 'local' to Hawaii, while English was seen to be part of the *haole* (Caucasian) identity (Drager, 2012). Although non-English speaking Caucasians also worked on the plantations, the term 'local' has come to mean those descended from Asian immigrant groups, as well as indigenous Hawaiians. These days, about half of the population of Hawaii speak Pidgin (Sakoda and Siegel, 2003).

Caucasians born, raised, or residing in Hawaii may also understand and speak Pidgin. However, there can be a negative reaction to Caucasians speaking Pidgin, even when the Caucasians self-identify as 'locals'. This is discussed in the YouTube video, *Being White in Hawaii* (Timahification, 2014), and parodied in the YouTube video, *Hawaiian Haole* (YouRight, 2016).

Why is it offensive for a Caucasian to speak Pidgin? To answer this question, this paper will examine the parody video, *Hawaiian Haole*; 'local'

identity in Hawaii; and race in Hawaii. Finally, the viewpoints of three 'local' *haole* will be presented.

II. HAWAIIAN HAOLE: A PARODY ON YOUTUBE

In the video *Hawaiian Haole* on YouTube, 'local' characters BJ and Bryce are talking with *haole* character Riley (who is wearing a reversed baseball cap and sunglasses). Riley is speaking with a heavy Pidgin accent and using various Pidgin expressions such as *Howzit* (hello) and *brah* (friend), while the 'local' characters are not. The 'locals' challenge Riley for using Pidgin.

BJ:	"Why are you talking like that?"
Bryce:	"You're from Nebraska."
Riley:	"Nebraska, Hawaii, what is the difference, brah? We're all Hawaiian... I can talk the talk."

When another Caucasian character approaches (the same actor wearing a ski cap and eyeglasses), Riley chastises the new character for using expressions such as *dog* and *freshes*, which are borrowed from Hip Hop culture.

Riley (speaking to the new character):
"Stop acting and talking like you're not white, brah.... Don't act and talk like you're not white, brah, that is offensive, brah. <i>Haole</i> boys are so irritating, brah. They take everybody's culture. Go home, cry, <i>haole</i> boy."
(YouRight, 2016)

In the second exchange, Riley states that co-opting the language of another culture is offensive while continuing to use Pidgin himself. This is discussed further in section V.

III. WHO IS 'LOCAL' ?

Rather than taking culture, isn't it possible for a *haole* to identify with 'local' culture? How about the residents of Hawaii who are neither 'local' nor Caucasian; what is their status?

Okamura (1990) states, "In the 1930s and 1940s, 'local' came to represent a growing awareness of working-class solidarity on the part of all plantation groups against the *haole* group that had displaced the Hawaiians and seized economic and political control." However, both Hawaiians and *haole* are currently underrepresented in the political arena, while Chinese and Japanese (known as "older immigrant descendants") make up the vast majority of Senate, House, and key staff positions (Collins and Stauffer, 2000).

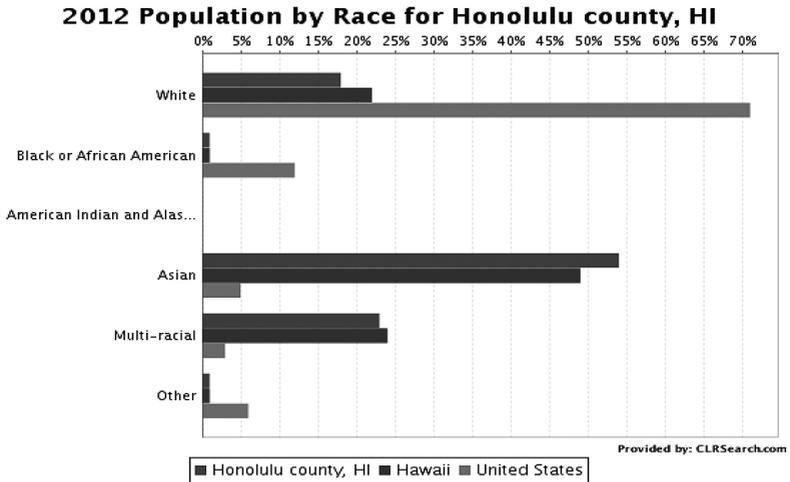
Consequently, Ohnuma (2002) states that, "As the Chinese and Japanese communities have gained wealth and power relative to other immigrant groups, a tension has arisen in the identity 'local' that corresponds to their increased attempts to stake a claim to locality. In their working-class origins and cross-generational attachment to their island home, are not local *haole* in fact more local?" [Emphasis added.]

Furthermore, Ohnuma (2002) states that when she moved from the mainland and was accepted as 'local' on the basis of her Japanese heritage, she discovered her "closet *haole* within." Rohrer (1997), herself a 'local' *haole*, states that, "*Haoleness* has as much to do with place as race, with culture as biology. Consequently there is a peculiar *haoleness* about non-white ethnics from the mainland."

IV. RACE IN HAWAII

Hawaii became a US state in 1959. As indicated in the chart below, there are more people identifying as Caucasian or African American (more than

80% combined) in the continental US than there are in Honolulu county or Hawaii (less than 25% combined). Conversely, there are more people identifying as Asian or multiracial in Honolulu county or Hawaii (about 70% combined) than there are in the continental US (less than 10%) (CLRSearch, 2012).

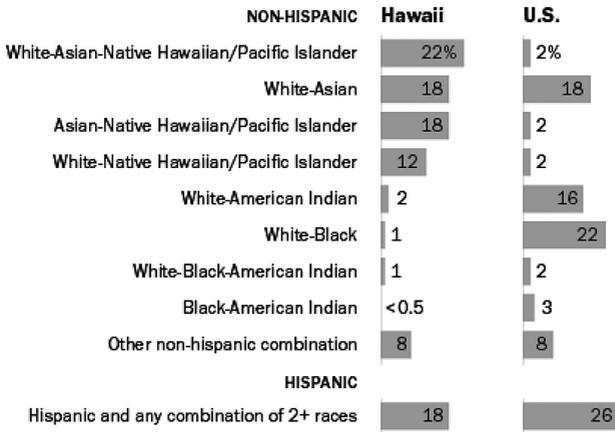


Krogstad (2015) writes that “In terms of total population, Hawaii is one of the smallest (1.4 million people), ranking 40th out of 50 states. But when ranking states with the highest total multiracial population, the state ranks sixth, with more than 330,000.” The following chart shows that more than half (56%) of the multiracial population in Hawaii has some Caucasian heritage. This is similar to the continental US, where the majority (62%) of the multiracial population also indicates some Caucasian heritage. In both Hawaii and the continental US, the same percentage (18%) identify as “White-Asian.” However, while the continental US has a significantly larger percentage of the multiracial population identifying as “White-American Indian” (16% vs. 2%) and “White-Black” (22% vs. 1%) than Hawaii does, Hawaii has

significantly more identifying as “White-Asian-Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander” (22% vs. 2%) and “White-Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander” (12% vs. 2%) (Krogstad, 2015).

Hawaii’s Multiracial Population Differs From U.S.

Share of the multiracial (2+ races) population



Note: Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.
 Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of 2013 American Community Survey (IPUMS)

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What is the significance of this? Given that the majority of multiracial people in Hawaii have *some* Caucasian heritage, at least some of the Hawaiian residents who self-identify as ‘local’ are also part *haole* themselves. Why then is it offensive for *haole* to speak Pidgin?

V. HAWAIIAN HAOLE VIDEO

The YouTube video *Hawaiian Haole* (YouRight, 2016) is mocking the

haole who is not aware he is not 'local'. In this case, the character of Riley has moved from Nebraska and does not qualify as coming from an older immigrant group. However, one can expect that after residing in Hawaii for some time, a Nebraskan transplant or other new resident would come to learn some of the local languages, whether Hawaiian, Pidgin, or Hawaii English. Yet the implication of the video seems to be that excessive use of Pidgin, particularly the Pidgin accent, by *haole* is not socially acceptable. Is this always true? Section VI discusses this further.

Ohnuma (2002) states there are no clear boundaries of what constitutes a local *haole*, but in her research she defined this group as working or middle class, living in white enclaves on the windward side (Kailua) or outer islands (especially Maui), and descended from those who worked in shipping or trading or who came to the islands as castaways or drifters. There were also Caucasians who worked on the plantations alongside Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Pacific Islander, and Korean workers, and these included Portuguese, Puerto Rican, Spanish, Russian, and German laborers (Drager, 2012).

English was the language of the schools, and most students admitted were of European descent (Drager, 2012). Nevertheless, Caucasians from non-English-speaking laborers worked in the fields alongside their Asian counterparts. Despite this, their descendants are not considered 'local' while those descended from Asian nationalities are—even though more than half of the multiracial people identify as part-Caucasian themselves. While the 'local' identity may have been about developing a power base, *haole* are not among the older immigrant descendant groups who are strongly represented in the local political arena. Caucasians are, however, strongly represented at the federal level in civilian and military jobs and by the economic power of the domestic tourist base.

VI. LOCAL HAOLE

What is the experience of *haole* who speak Pidgin? The following narratives are gleaned from an interview with Cami in the YouTube video *Being White in Hawaii* (Timahification, 2014), Denby Fawcett's article in the Huffington Post (2015), and personal correspondence with Eric, a colleague from Honolulu. While it is not revealed whether Cami is descended from Caucasians who worked on the plantations, Denby and Eric are not. In her article, Denby indicates she relocated to Hawaii as an adult. In his interview, Eric stated that he relocated as a child. These three talk specifically about their experiences using Pidgin. A longer narrative and deeper political history of *haole* is provided in Judy Rohrer's 2010 book, *Haoles in Hawaii*.

A. CAMI

“Q: How do you feel about being a white local in Hawaii?”

A: It's kind of difficult sometimes because when people first meet you, they see that you're a white person, and they automatically think you're from the military or from the mainland and stuff, so when I first meet them they don't really like me.

Q: Do you feel like you have to prove yourself in local settings?

A: To be honest, in a lot of local settings, I actually try to take the tourist role on because ... if you don't act like one they get suspicious, I think. Also, I have to kind of watch how I talk around certain people, because if I talk the way I usually talk, which is kind of [a] heavy Pidgin accent, in front of local people I don't know, they think I am making fun of them.”
(Timahification, 2014)

B. DENBY

“Local *haole* would seem to be an oxymoron because the word *haole* is defined ... as a white person of foreign origin. So how can a white foreigner be considered in any way ‘local’?”

I contend that localness has more to do with where we carry out our most meaningful life experiences rather than where we are born or the color of our skin.

Taiye Selasi, a writer of Nigerian-Ghanaian descent, addresses the topic of localness in a TED talk [en]titled, ‘Don’t ask where I am from, ask where I am a local.’ Selasi says, ‘All experience is local. All identity is experience.’ She says our experiences determine where we consider ourselves ‘a local.’

[Pidgin] is a legitimate language known by linguists as Hawaiian Creole English. To say a *haole* should never speak Pidgin is ridiculous, like saying a non-French person should never speak French.

Despite this logic and my love for hearing Pidgin, I follow the local, unspoken restriction: As a *haole*, I never speak Pidgin except in small phrases among close friends.” (Fawcett, 2015)

C. ERIC

“Q: What was your overall experience of being *haole* in Hawaii?”

A: I feel that it has taught me about racism and what it feels like to be a minority. I also have learned that our belief systems and attitudes are somewhat influenced by race but not completely.

Q: Did you have any positive experiences using Pidgin?

A: Some. I am in a Hawaiian fraternity with practically all local people who are my friends. I have also joined a canoe paddling team. With both groups I interact in Pidgin and the experience is positive. I have also been in situations where locals have talked to me and made generalizations about other *haole* without understanding that I am a *haole*.

Q: What do you think the overall perception of *haole* using Pidgin is?

A: I think it's possible to perceive a *haole* speaking Pidgin as someone who wants to fit into a group that they don't belong, but I also think that some *haole* can become part of Hawaii and see themselves as local. I know for a fact that some *haole* who grow up in very Hawaiian areas identify better with local Hawaiian people [than with] white people from the [continental] U.S." (Yabuno, 2017)

VII. CONCLUSION

Why is it offensive for a Caucasian to speak Pidgin? Because race has largely defined the concept of 'local' identity in Hawaii. Indigenous Hawaiians are the only true 'locals' of Hawaii. Yet Hawaiians have their own language, Hawaiian, and this language has influenced both Hawaii English and Pidgin.

Pidgin (Hawaiian Creole English) developed on plantations, so it would seemingly 'belong' to those who are descended from plantation workers. Despite the fact that many plantation workers were Caucasian, 'local' has come to mean those of Asian heritage, and only 'locals' are entitled to speak Pidgin.

Many Japanese, Chinese, and Asian Americans who now reside in Hawaii are not descended from older immigrant groups, yet they are able to take on the 'local' identity by appearance or ethnicity. Chinese and Japanese descendants now dominate local politics, while neither indigenous Hawaiians

nor *haole* do. Nevertheless, the 'local' identity pushes back against the Caucasian presence that led to Hawaii becoming part of the United States and the ongoing federal presence. Pidgin helps to create a boundary between in group and out group for the 'local' identity.

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