

V&V

VISIONS & VOICES

Stirring the Pot: Self-Determination as Quiet Disruption

By Axel Defngin



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The bright red 6/10 stared back at me from the corner of the page in my hand. A red “X” had been placed over it, and an 8/10 was circled next to it, but the 6/10 screamed much louder. The page was my own internship application that I had submitted months ago. Why was I then selected to be placed at this political internship office in Washington, DC if I only received a 6/10? I stood hunched over the filing cabinet for what seemed like hours looking over every red scribble over my application stating that the applicant does not seem to understand in-depth issues or solutions, the applicant is unaware of major issues in the community, the applicant is not politically inclined.

In those undergraduate years, I first encountered DEI as JEDI (Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion). It was in that 2016 summer

in DC during the first rise of Trump that I tried to understand that I was part of the AAPI (now AA & NHPI) community, I was a POC (now BIPOC), and that these spaces needed Pacific Islanders to continue promoting diversity. It was difficult to find another Pacific Islander at sister organizations in DC, let alone my own. I connected the dots in my head and realized that I had been selected to boost diversity/representation of Pacific Islanders in my cohort. All the confidence that I had mustered traveling from Yap to DC for more than 24 hours fell apart in that moment.

On January 20, 2025, Trump signed a US executive order dismantling Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, redirecting agencies to advance a policy of “equal dignity and respect,” and marking a call for Americans to return to the myth that America is a

meritocracy. The order calls for federal employment practices to reward “individual initiative, skills, performance, and hard work.” This rhetoric ignores a long American history of empire: systems of inequality built to oppress the subaltern at the fringes of American-Pacific manifest destiny. These systems, hierarchies, and structures of empire persist. This paper is a counterclaim for those that exist within and without empire to ride the wave and stir the pot as well.

In the islands of Waqab, Yap, we understand symbolically that our island, our world, rests as a pot over a hot flame balanced delicately over the Dalip pi Nguchol (three cooking stones). These stones, representative of the three paramount traditional powers in Yap, show us that power must remain in balance throughout history. When one side rises or falls, balance must be restored, lest the island fall into ruin and chaos. For years, Yapese people have feared that the pot has reached its tipping point facing risks from climate change, Chinese foreign development, increasing modernity, and now \$2 billion in US military infrastructure in the works. Our ancestors too faced empire head-on in its many forms through the Spanish, Japanese, German, and US Naval eras, and when the pot was stirred, they resiliently chose to find opportunity in the heart of chaos.

Quiet Disruption

In 1962, High Deputy Commissioner of the Trust Territory of the Pacific (TTPI) Jose “Pepe” Benitez was touring Yap when he came upon a tin shack functioning as an elementary school. He kicked its wall claiming, “This is not a school! This is not America!” Chief of Weno, Chuuk, Petrus Mailo, was doubtful of Benitez’s promises to improve infrastructure and education and compared him to a loud bird that calls its own name and flies away (Hezel 2016). A Yapese proverb states that when one whispers, those around them are forced to lean in and listen while those that are loud are met with shut ears.

Resistance, similar to change, need not always be loud to be transformative though it can be. In Yap, one story/theory states that gaslaew, the provocative genre of men’s standing dance, came about as a form of resilience during initial encounters with missionaries. As Yapese cultural practices became forbidden under colonial occupation, these and other dances had to be conducted in secret. That meant assembling together under threat of violence, moving and dancing under the guise of darkness while laboring during the day, and saving loud voices for opportune times. This allowed Yapese to preserve culture while avoiding confrontation unless absolutely needed in various structures of oppression. Quiet assertion of identity through quiet disruption.

In *The Value of Hawai’i: Huluhia, the Turning* (2020), the huluhia—a turning—marks a rising in every upheaval, and the flowering of the new. Just as huluhuli chicken requires constant rotation to cook evenly, our pot must continue stirring to prevent stagnation and burning. By stirring, we redistribute and balance the pot without

toppling any stones. We do this especially when external forces have begun to fuel the fire beneath us in recent years.

Reflecting on my own experiences with the frameworks of DEI in the past, I see that it was not perfect. It was neither quiet nor subtle, and often led to people choosing to flip the table rather than have a seat at it. It often chose to label “underrepresented minorities” without asking those communities how they wished to self-identify. However, the intentions of DEI frameworks recognized that a meritocracy cannot exist without equity. Not in our schools, not in government, and not in the distribution of power. Dismantling DEI risks sinking marginalized voices to the pot’s scorched bottom when those at the top of the pot remain warm and cozy. Yet our ancestors teach us: fire is not only destructive. It can cook, nourish, and provide—if we tend to it together.

Our response must be to recenter people over politics, whether in governance, regional relationships, community or otherwise. By prioritizing self-determination at local and individual/personal levels, we can improve agency in times of empire’s peak. Let us disrupt hegemony through thunderous whispers of resistance. Empire thrives on division and distraction. Let us instead stir hand in hand and heal. The cooking stones are strong, but they require our hands to keep the balance. Our islands, our community, our pot have continued to hold us steady and fed us for thousands of years. And so, may we continue to recite lyrics that once graced familiar lips, continue to receive choruses of whispers, and continue to dance in the dark.

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Visions & Voices is a quarterly periodical published by the Pacific Islands Development Program at the East-West Center. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the policies or positions of the Pacific Islands Development Program or the East-West Center.

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