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# When Dark Flakes Fall, Realizing A Visionary Indigenous Origin Story

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**When Dark Flakes Fall  
Realizing A Visionary Indigenous Origin Story**

By

Kona Ongoy

Accepted in Partial Completion  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Education

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Chair, Dr. Nick Stanger

Dr. Gene Myers

ENVS DEPARTMENT CHAIR

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Signature:     Kona Ongoy    

Date:     March 14, 2019

Author Note

**Puka**

I am guided by the currents and stars  
Kalo given to sustain my life  
Pueo watches over me  
Teaching me the secrets of silence at sea

Cane fields double overhead  
Chewing a stalk as I wander  
the economy of colonization  
generational decay of my monarchy

One dad, one mom  
One sister, one me  
One mom, two moms  
One dad, one mom, one sister, one me

Standing on rooftops watching it all burn  
Dark snow falls on my uniform  
The fields will grow again  
If not cane  
wheat and sheep by other white men

Land locked will not stop my pursuit  
I will be an elder of the sea  
My mind becoming aware of what truth is  
To be developed and not defined

I am not to be explained  
I am to be  
I am to feel  
I am found

(Ongoy. 2017)

### Acknowledgments

To my family. To my immigrant grandparents, for crossing seas and forging new lives with hope. To my Indigenous grandparents, for maintaining the continuity of our culture through colonization. To my mother and father, for inspiring their children to lead fulfilling lives on any path they found to be engaging. To my sister, for experiencing a mixed race life by my side.

To family I discovered along the way; Nick Stanger, for showing me Indigeneity has a place in higher education and to my graduate classmates for sharing your lived experience and engaging in educational theory. Also, to people who's season in my life have passed, you too are part of my story.

Family, you have been kind, patient, and loving. You have shared your stories and given me the most valuable resource available, your time.

Me ka ha'aha'a,  
Kona Ongoy

## Abstract

The purpose of this work is to explore the current children's literature that represents and presents lived experiences of underrepresented peoples within North America. Narratives in children's literature are historically homogenous in themes rooted in dominant colonial culture. This can be problematic with regards to supporting the diversity, equity, and inclusion of all people, in and out of educational settings.

Using myself as a site of study, I examined the sensations and current state of my mixed racial identity. In addition, I have collected and reviewed currently available children's literature as a point of inspiration to write my own story. There is a growing body of children's literature which supports and upholds the lived experience of underrepresented peoples within North America. Some titles in this movement include, *Wild Berries*, *Shi-shi-etko*, *Island Born*, and *They Say Blue*. Still, the number of books which enforce a dominant colonial narrative also dominate the shelves of schools and libraries.

This process of research and self-study has allowed me to see a vision. I have documented this vision in an illustrated book. This realization of a visionary Indigenous origin story will increase the number of underrepresented stories based on lived experience and will add to the body of Indigenous Knowledge.

*Keywords:* Indigenous Knowledge, Hawaiian, story, children's literature, mixed, race, education

We all have a story worth telling. We all come from somewhere. Each of our histories is saturated with nuance and complexities. Human relations are complex, inspiring, brutal, and mysterious. “We are all Indigenous from some land, some place. All indigenous means is continuity... It means that which has endured, that which has thrived” (Aluli-meyer)

Western Washington University is historically and predominantly white, with low diversity in student body and even lower numbers of diversity in faculty and staff (Appendix A). I identify as Native Hawaiian, and thus am part of a group which makes up 0.4% of Western Washington University’s campus, or approximately 70 individuals.

Upon completing degree requirements, whose story will ultimately be heard? This paper serves as the western oriented output of my graduate studies. An Indigenous origin story will serve as the Indigenous oriented entry into my graduate studies. This story has been reviewed by my graduate advisor and project committee as a western-oriented evaluation of work completed. The story may be made available upon request to me as the current bearer of this knowledge.

Examining my own identity and considering its implications for education, particularly for young children who might identify like myself, I explore my own story as it relates to colonization and Indigenous Knowledge. This project is the realization of my story; which is an Indigenous, colonized and immigrant story.

### **Racial Autobiography**

I did not understand Jesus was Jewish until adulthood. At St. Michael School, on the north shore of Oahu, the nuns were from the Philippines and it made sense to me that Jesus also couldn’t pronounce the letter ‘f’ with enough conviction to curse. Perhaps that’s why they didn’t. If any one of them was going to let an expletive out of their black and white power habits, it would have been Sister Mel. She seemed the most serious and easily flustered, which equated to

her enforcing the rules much more diligently than the other nuns. I heard stories of her striking older kids with a yard stick, but never saw or experienced that. Perhaps the practice was fading, like most parts of our town.

The Waialua Sugar Company scaled back the last of its operations while I was in elementary school, and eventually it was purchased by Dole. My Portuguese grandfather retired as a crane operator from the plantation. He and my grandmother, both Hawaii born Portuguese, grew up, and then raised a family in the Portuguese camp owned by the plantation. (Portuguese were brought to Hawaii from Madeira and the Azores as part of the largest European group to enter Hawaii as plantation labor. (Geschwender 1988)) In the time between my grandparents' generation and mine, the Portuguese language was lost and replaced with a more ambiguous culture that came to be my understanding of a small over-populated lava rock in the Pacific.

My father's parents--a Pilipino<sup>1</sup> electrician and a Hawaiian ukulele player--are where the other half of my heritage is rooted.

I am Hawaiian, Portuguese, Pilipino. The island of Oahu is where I was born. This geography calibrated my initial orientation to the world; a vibrant people of tradition, manual labor, art, a monarchy, and the ongoing evolution of colonization.

My childhood home was a complex home, racially, socially, and economically. My parents' generation had been more open to mixed race marriages than previous generations and we were raised Catholic. As the sugar plantation declined, properties were sold and segregated

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<sup>1</sup> *Filipino* is the Hispanized (or Anglicized) way of referring to both the people and the language in the Philippines. Note that it is also correct to say Filipino for a male and Filipina for a female. *Pilipino*, is how the locals from the Philippines refer to themselves, or to their national language. <http://www.hawaii.edu/cps/filipino.html>



camps began to blend together. The physical houses my grandparents and my parents eventually bought were originally plantation property.

*Amaka Aloha* was the hula studio my Tutu and her daughters owned and operated. It is where my younger sister learned hula and where I learned ukulele. The studio was a rented space on the grounds of a Japanese church adjacent to the beach. We would learn to strum songs and sometimes play for the dancers while Tutu sang in Hawaiian.

Community was ever-present at *Amaka Aloha*. A family of indigenous and mixed people, learning, sharing, and keeping Hawaiian Culture in the minds, bodies, and spirits of young people. This is part of the continuity described by Aluli-Meyer's explanation of Holographic Epistemology.

This continuity of Indigenous Knowledge became muddled when my family moved to the mainland. In December, the middle of my 6<sup>th</sup>-grade year, my parents moved us from Waialua, Hawaii to Helena, Montana. The shock of such a move took away my ability to recall where I was from, a sensation I reflect on now as a survival instinct. I do not remember being sad or worried we were in a new place. I just remember wanting to settle. It would be the first time I experienced snow, long road trips, and vast amounts of land.

In Montana I attended a small catholic school. There were no nuns at this school, but the teachers were the same uptight adults. At mainland school, my English used the same words, but a different rhythm. Although all students wore a uniform everyday, I started to see for myself the ways I stood out amongst my peers. My island orientation often lead me into awkward loneliness. And with these sensations of unknown direction, I learned mainland ways, spoke with more clear diction, and only wanted to eat at home where the food was comforting and local.

I view my racial identity as mixed. My parents and grandparents came from many different lands, brought together in community by manual labor and the hope of a better life. Culturally I was saturated in Hawaiian customs due to my physical place of childhood. I am also filled with Portuguese culture due to the amount of time I spent at my grandparents' home studying the ways of blood sausage, sweet bread and huli huli chicken. My parents added to the complexity of my racial identity by being the first generation to attend college. This was something they encouraged me to do.

Now, in the final quarter of my graduate schooling, I am continuing to uncover and unpack the complexity of my racial identity. This program and project has given me tools, time, and support to do this work. This work has provided me a confidence to contribute to the body of Indigenous Knowledge be another voice of encouragement for other Indigenous people engaging in similar work. (Ongoy. 2017)

### **Children's Literature**

Why do we designate literature by a target audience? Specifically, why do we have a genre of 'children's literature'? At what age are we considering a human a child? Should age be the sole factor by which to decide childhood? What about emotional intelligence? What about cultural norms? These are all questions that arose for me while working on examining "children's literature" through the eyes of a Native Hawaiian.

In America, childhood is mostly a social construct strengthened by clunky educational institutions and adultism. Bell discussed the concept this way:

Young people in this country are forced to go to school for 12 years, whether school is an effective learning environment for them or not. They are forced by their parents...students have no voice, no power, no decision-making avenues to make significant

change...Another institutional example [of adultism] is the absence of socially responsible, productive, and connected roles for young people in most societies. Certainly in the United States, young people find few jobs, no real policy making roles, no positions of political power, and no high expectations of young people's contribution to society...the youth market is exploited for profit as the manufacturing and entertainment industries manipulate styles, fads, popularity, and all other aspects of mass culture. (Bell. 1995. 547)

The description of institutional adultism extends into what is commonly referred to as children's literature. Many commercial press books are written and created to entertain and make a profit. Most children's books lack explanatory information such as positionality of author or if the story was based on lived experience. The absence of such information can lead to consumers manipulating narratives and appropriating cultures through their implicit bias.

For example, on the face, *Julian is a Mermaid* (Love 2018) looked to be a wonderfully illustrated book about a young boy exploring his gender identity. Traveling to the pool, he becomes intrigued with the mermaids he sees, giving him the idea to become a mermaid himself. The book however gives no explanation about why this story is important. This lack of explanation places the narrative of *Julian is a Mermaid* in a vulnerable position to be misunderstood by a reader and could be greatly disconnected from people's lived experience.

Some stories are vague or problematic in their plot. *Mustafa* (Gay 2018) tells the story of a refugee boy who explores his new home. While he visits a near park in an unfamiliar environment, he meets a girl with a cat. The book develops to show the girl (who appears to be of the dominant American white narrative) telling Mustafa he is allowed to be here and that is

how the book ends. This girl figure in this book displays traits of the White Savior Industrial Complex<sup>2</sup>

When underrepresented groups do not see themselves or their children reflected in literature, they are being told by society they are less than. With regards to diversity, the lack of board books featuring children of color denies these children an important resource for developing a positive self-concept. Instead, beginning in infancy children of color not only get the message from books that their lives and their stories are not important but also that to be white is better. (Hughes-Hassell, 2010. 224)

Recently the established books of Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss) are being evaluated for the first time by people of color. The research of Katie Ishizuka and Ramón Stephens highlights and challenges many people to rethink their parenting and childhoods. They show how racism and white supremacy have been sold to millions through the medium of Dr. Seuss's children's literature and how this impacts our society.

Children's books provide impressions and messages that can last a lifetime, and shape how children see and understand themselves, their homes, communities, and world (Santora). A long history of research shows that text accompanied with imagery, such as books with pictures, shapes children's racial attitudes. When children's books center Whiteness, erase people of color and other oppressed groups, or present people of color in stereotypical, dehumanizing, or subordinate ways, they both ingrain and reinforce internalized racism and White supremacy. (Ishizuka and Ramón. 2019. 6)

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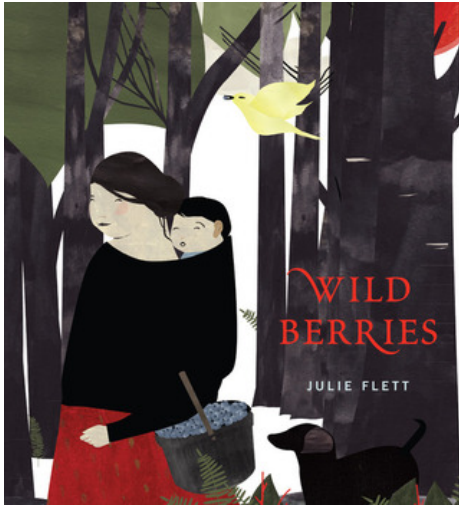
<sup>2</sup> Originally coined by Nigerian-American novelist Teju Cole in response to the Kony 2012 media frenzy, this phrase refers to the confluence of practices, processes, and institutions that reify historical inequities to ultimately validate white privilege.

Ishizuka and Ramón present *Horton Hears a Who!* as an example of White Savior Industrial Complex within a Dr. Seuss book. “widely cited as promoting tolerance ...the impact is that it reinforces themes of White supremacy, Orientalism, and White saviorism. It positions the Whos in a deficit-based framework as the dominant, paternalistic Horton enacts the White Savior Industrial Complex.” (Ishizuka and Ramón. 2019. 6)

### **Diversity In Story**

After finding problematic aspects in many children’s books, the concept of a resource focused on reflecting underrepresented children in books seemed to be a logical next step. In fall of 2018 I launched *Diversityinstory.com* as a location for anyone to find underrepresented stories which are told by people whom possess the lived experience of those stories. This web resource is not the first in sharing underrepresented children’s stories, but it does currently focus on Indigenous and refugee stories, subject areas which are not available in a single collection. All parts of this website are free, ad free, and available to the public. This website generates no revenue and I am currently its sole contributor. The goal over the next year is to expand its reach in both subject areas and increase the number of contributors.

Books and stories written from lived experience and with the intention of telling the truth as a foundation are valuable works of literature, particularly for the young children and their families. The creativity in presentation paired with language and experience from outside the dominant American white narrative are more closely aligned with the sensations of my lived experience as a racially mixed person. Using my lived experience as a guide I present some books below that speak truth and reflect underrepresented peoples. These reviews are written to be conversational for more equitable access.

*Wild Berries* by Julie Flett

Julie Flett is Cree-Metis and has presented a lived experience in a simple and insightful way. Written primarily in English, one focus of the books is the introduction of the Cree language in the context of picking blueberries. Cree terms introduced in the book are made accessible through a pronunciation guide provided at the end. The book also gives a gateway for the reader to experience blueberries in a practical way with an included ‘Wild Blueberry Jam’ recipe.

The presentation of our human relationship to the natural world was subtle and simple. There are pages of observation of the environment in between the berry picking storyline. The ability for humans and animals to move and interact with the same space was another idea gently presented along with a connection between our human ability to sing as well as a birds ability to sing.

There are many connections and relationships to be drawn from this story. The publication is presented in a way appropriate for readers of different histories and life experiences. With many areas experiencing a resurgence of native language speakers and immersion schools, this book has a place in any home or school library.

*Shanyaak'utlaax* a Tlingit story edited by Johnny Marks, Hans Chester, David Katzeek, Nora Dauenhauer, and Richard Dauenhauer.

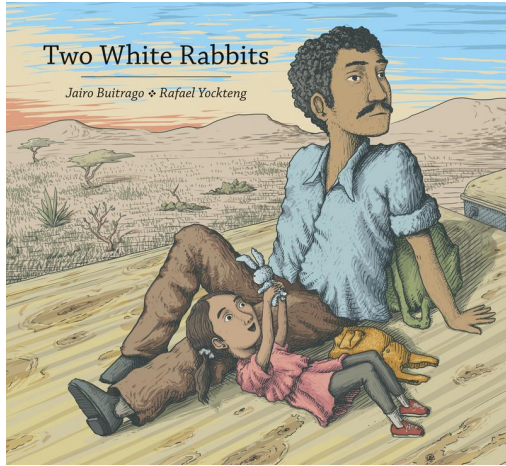


*Shanyaak'utlaax, Salmon Boy* is an abbreviated version of an adult Tlingit story. The value of this book is in respect to nature and the reciprocity of beings. The illustrations provide a captivating backdrop to the bilingual text. This book has an incredible amount of culture packed into a simple form factor. After the protagonist disrespects part of nature, they are taken on a journey of becoming. This narrative is a coming of age story rooted in a specific

culture with universal values.

Another graceful publication for strengthening the continuity of Indigenous Knowledge, *Shanyaak'utlaax, Salmon Boy* gives me the hope that revitalization and continued tradition is possible in our technological world.

Each page of the book has both Tlingit and English. There is an audio recording of the Tlingit which follows the story page by page. This audio is an amazing resource provided by Sealaska Heritage.

***Two White Rabbits*** by Jairo Buitrago

Every year, thousands of migrants attempt the journey from South America, Central America, and Mexico toward the United States/Mexico border. The reasons for their travel are numerous. Becoming a refugee is one of the many reasons to make this journey, and this is most likely the case with the father/daughter characters in this book.

Told from the perspective of the young girl, there are so many unknowns, one of them being “Where are we going”. What the young girl does discover along the way is the natural environment they are traveling through. She explores these natural elements through counting, something that can easily be interactive while reading this book to a younger person.

There is an overwhelming amount of information we don’t know about the mental effects of being a young refugee. This book approaches the subject of being a refugee with an open heart and without a conclusion, as most if not all refugee stories are, ongoing.

It appears the book was originally published in Spanish, *Dos Conejos Blancos*. At the time of this post I was not able to obtain the original version of this book and an update will be posted when possible.



***Why am I Here?*** by Constance Ørbeck-Nilssen

WHY AM I HERE?  
Constance Ørbeck-Nilssen & Alin Duzalin

The value in this book is its openness to being open ended. A question with a lifetime of answers, *Why Am I Here?* is a necessary question we should all ask ourselves at some point.

Originally published in Norway in 2014, the story of this book is crafted through the use of

questions and hypothesis. Why are people where they are? While this philosophical question may lean toward an older reader, the soothing illustrations, simple layout give a nice interaction for learning to listen or read.

While reading through the story, I found myself thinking deeply about simple things. Why this path? Why now? What if it was another way? Through the question “What if I were somewhere else-”, the book leads the reader through landscapes of varying populations, social status, environmental hardships and forced human migration. What is my relationship to place?

Throughout the story, the protagonist (who goes unnamed and nearly unidentified in most ways) brings their boat into every scene. This presence and reminder of the opening illustration of where they are from is a pleasant through line in the exploration of other environments.

This book appears to be a mainstream publication with a dominant audience in mind. Though the protagonist appears to have light skin and dark hair at a mind shaggy length, they are not identified by their race, gender or national origins in any way. Keeping this in mind, there may be other books which accomplish the same philosophical reflection and represent the culture a different reader.

### **When Dark Flakes Fall, an Indigenous Visionary Origin Story**

For Hawaiians, language is one of the foundations of our orientation to the world. Words which may appear the same when written have meaning beyond a single use and can be found in context across mind, body, and spirit. (Aluli-Meyer. 2014). “The Hawaiian word for knowledge is ‘ike, to see/to know. Seeing then is an act beyond mere looking. Seeing is infused with the cultural shaping of its purpose” (Meyer 2014. 99)

The presentation and evaluation of information in this paper mainly serves as an entry for western oriented academics. Bringing this research into action through story telling gives Native Hawaiians more equitable access to my graduate work. My relation to my own Indigenous Knowledge and experience has brought me to a space in which I have realized a vision: an origin story based on applying my present epistemologies to the origins of my past. My use of the word vision comes from the act of my Indigenous self realizing in story and is also influenced by Walidah Imarisha’s explanation of *visionary fiction*.

“Visionary Fiction” is a term we developed to distinguish science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power. Visionary fiction encompasses all of the fantastic, with the arc always bending toward justice. We believe this space is vital for any process of decolonization, because the decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless. (Imarisha. 2015. 4)

Embracing the sensations of creation, Indigenous Knowledge, justice, and decolonization, my story does not overwrite the past of my kupuna (ancestors), rather it applies

present theoretical technology and epistemology to reexamine the events which have and continue to pressure Indigenous ways of being. The story follows the journey of an owl and seal as they experience colonization.

One of the greatest challenges of this project is bringing together western-oriented ways of knowing and Indigenous ways of knowing. This paper in combination with [diversityinstory.com](http://diversityinstory.com) and my visionary origin story, attempts this collaboration with the function of western graduate schooling and the pieces of a lived Indigenous/mixed race experience.

When the Western scientific story meets that of Native origins, a clash of paradigms occurs, because cultural stories of origin are creative interpretations of the experience of a people in participation with places. Literal fact is woven with metaphoric meaning. The ethnocentric notion that only the Western scientific story is accurate prevents any dialogue regarding the participatory meaning of Native origin stories and their orientation to a people's homeland. (Cajete. 2000. 75)

*When Dark Flakes Fall* has connection to western knowledge based on time and place of its telling along with the academic pieces used within this paper, but it is not rooted in western knowledge or orientation. It is, at its core, an Indigenous story with an Indigenous orientation.

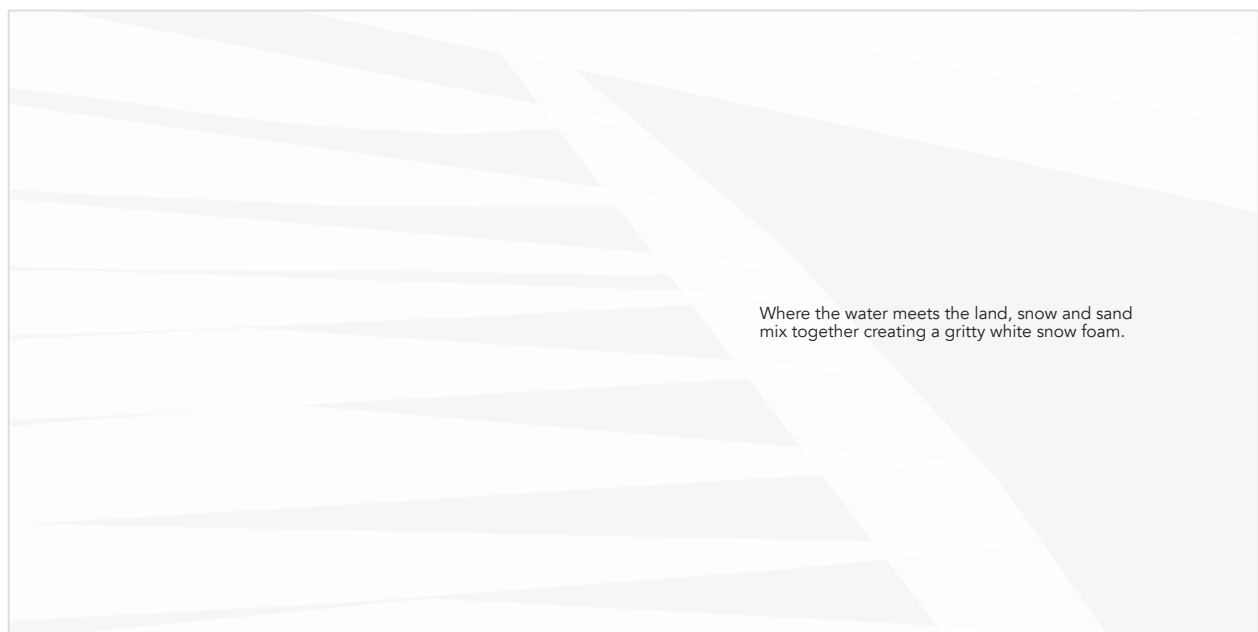
I have not made the complete story available in this paper due to the complex and sensitive relationship between Indigenous Knowledge and colonization. Through my lived experience in higher education and environmental education, I have seen Indigenous Knowledge misused and appropriated for individual wellbeing and organizational posturing.

I also hope to engage with individuals from all past experiences in what this visionary origin story has to offer. I believe there needs to be deep understanding and no negative intention to be allowed the honor of processing and sharing Indigenous Knowledge. To this end I have

included a few spreads from the first print draft of this story. If this story is of interest to you, please contact me.



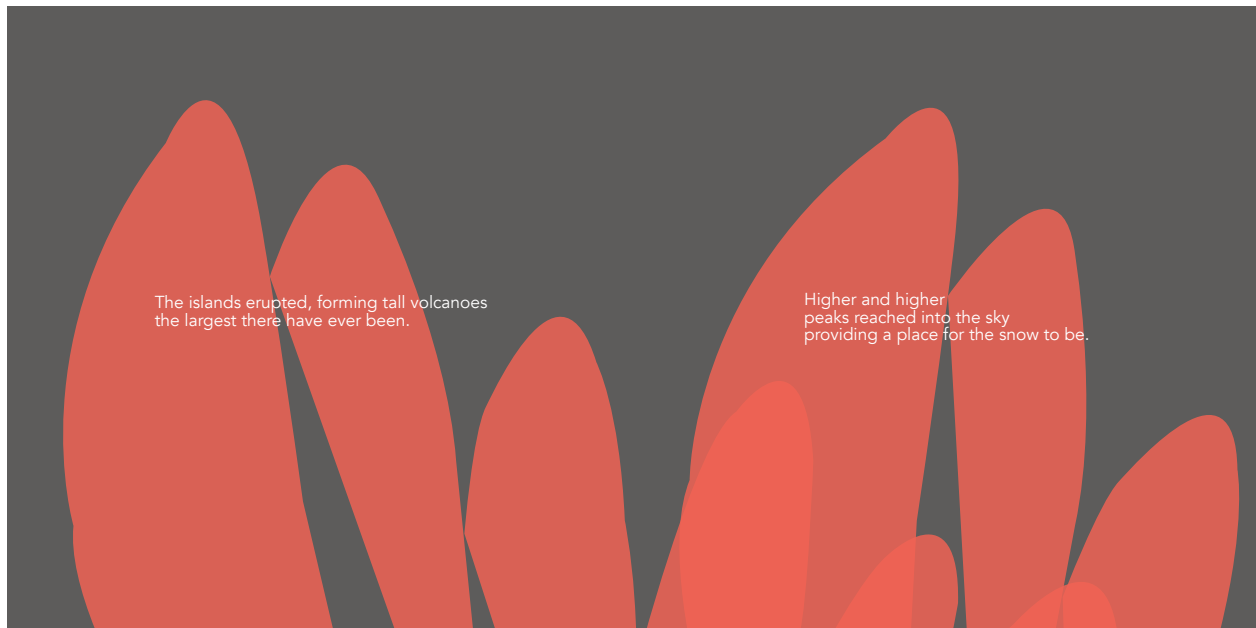
Snow fell quietly into the water – page 1 of the *When Dark Flakes Falls* book.



When the water meets the land, snow and sand mix together creating a gritty white snow foam – page 3 of the *When Dark Flakes Falls* book.



Pueo flies through the air, keeping watch over the island – page 13 of the *When Dark Flakes Falls* book



The islands erupted, forming tall volcanoes, the largest there have ever been – page 35 of the *When Dark Flakes Falls* book

To my Indigenous family, and any people deemed allies by Indigenous people, the story may be gifted in a physical format upon request. As we know our journey is ongoing, and this story is in support of all Indigenous journeys. I have learned my Indigenous orientation to the world has been within me always. Knowing this orientation is permanent empowers me to answer every day with my Indigenous life.

### **Conclusion**

Through this paper, and my website, [diversityinstory.com](http://diversityinstory.com), and my visionary Indigenous origin story, I hope to maintain the continuity of Indigenous Knowledge and add to its body of work. This research has given me the time, space, and flexibility to explore meaningful relationships which push me toward finding my own truth.

The sensations Aluli-Meyer expresses in her teaching of holographic epistemology have been present in me throughout this process.

I believe the main purpose of these ideas is to get us to think together --to open our minds and explore the purpose of our lives, our work, our particular way of viewing. Why are we this way? Why are you reading this article? There is a reason why you found this piece of my mind. Find out what it is and go into it with your passion for science, truth, culture and the needs of our time. Be of service to that. Respond with your life to the questions of your heart. Don't make it only about cognitive accumulation of information. We do not have the luxury of time. Discover what interdependence really means by listening to others, by watching how those who have more experience do things, and by sharing ideas when asked. Then go out and watch the moon rise and swim in waters freshly seasoned with Spring rains. (Aluli-Meyer. 2013. 99.)

We all have a story worth telling. We all come from somewhere. I encourage everyone to examine and explore your lived experience in relation to colonization and Indigenous Knowledge. For me this process has led me to realize a story which I will pass on to future generations.

Where are you from? What is your story?

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## Appendix A

Table 1: Western Washington Fall 2018 Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity

## Fall 2018 Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity

All Students	Fall 2018	% of Total
Hispanic	1,495	9.3%
Hispanic Ethnicity	570	
Hispanic & White	724	
Hispanic & non-White	201	
American Indian or Alaska Native	317	2.0%
American Indian or Alaska Native Single Race	55	
American Indian & White	262	
Asian	1,697	10.5%
Asian Single Race	996	
Asian & White	701	
Black or African American	418	2.6%
Black or African American Single Race	260	
Black & White	158	
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	70	0.4%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Island Single Race	32	
Native Hawaiian & White	38	
International	183	1.1%
Race and ethnicity unknown	314	1.9%
Two or more races: Other	198	1.2%
White	11,429	70.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,121</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<i>Students of Color</i>	<i>4,195</i>	<i>26.0%</i>

*Note:* This table was part of a university response to anti-Semitic vandalism and reports from students of being treated unfairly due to being part of a racial minority. These numbers may be problematic due to the self-reporting nature they were most likely generated from.

<https://www.wvu.edu/diversity>

Source of Data: Banner HR; WWU 2018 AAP for Women and Minorities. Data includes persons employed at any FTE.

Minority women are included in numbers for both women and minorities. Racial/ethnic minority includes individuals who self-identified as: Hispanic or Latino; American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian; Black or African American; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; or Two or more races. Providing demographic information is voluntary. The totals and percentages in the above table do not include individuals whose demographic information is not available.

Faculty numbers include tenure track and non-tenure track faculty.

*Table 2: Summary of Faculty and Staff Demographics*

## Summary of Faculty & Staff Demographics

**Employee demographics contained in the 2018 AAP for Women and Minorities**

	Total WWU Employees	Women		Racial/Ethnic Minority	
Faculty	965	487	50.47%	170	17.62%
Staff	1437	817	56.85%	241	16.77%
Total	2402	1304	54.29%	411	17.11%

*Note:* This table was part of a university response to anti-Semitic vandalism and reports from students of being treated unfairly due to being part of a racial minority. These numbers may be problematic due to the self-reporting nature they were most likely generated from.

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Faculty numbers include tenure track and non-tenure track faculty.