

LEHUA M. TAITANO

The Language of Recognition

One Indigenous Approach to Pedagogy

I AM IN LOVE with (a) Wisteria. I say *Wisteria* because it is what I know to say that can conjure an image for (some of) you, though the truth takes much more to get to. Besides, the truest names of things often vine toward *and* away from us, spiraling against a backdrop of cloud-scattered sky.

In this case, etymology only gets us so far, thanks to the taxonomic practices of Thomas Nuttall and the like.¹ The first names of *Wisteria* are not now commonly used—which is to say: they are alive but held close to the hearts of those who keep and honor such things, despite attempted erasures and the violence of colonial self-importance.

For my purposes here, then, I will call upon what I know of true naming in order to bring the life of this sweet flowering vine into your consciousness, so that we might delight in some of her ways. We'll call her *delight*, for a start. A proud bearer of draping scent. And what of her many arms, weighted in spring with clustering possibility? Do we know how to name a twining heart, clambering for recognition, for the right slant of light?

I do know this: I am transplanted again and again, my roots air clung during each migration, remembering the many names I have for home. And in every garden, *delight*.

I begin in the earth and twist toward the sun, that ancestral warmth, an orb of pulsing vision. Like *Wisteria*. With *Wisteria*. We are hand in hand, spiraling.

IN SOME LIFETIMES, at least, I am avian. Once a pelican, eyes drinking the glittering sea, my throat a pocket of foam and flotsam. I glide through keyhole arches, tuck my knees, and skim the salt mist of rolling waves, wings glazed in orange sunset. In another, I am a flitting bower bird. An architect of tending, I gather neat geometries and moments of

color, arranging patterns in the name of love and order. I preen and post my signs, then wait. In this I am most patient, tasting small breezes for the tenderest of movements.

(We are speaking of the language of recognition.)

TO ENACT those memories in this life, I create. Dream. Create again. Pastpresentfuture all emanating from spiralized time. *From* and *to*, yes, but throughout all, *part of*. An Indigenous sensibility. A CHamoru sensibility.

(We are speaking of the language of beginnings.)

IN THIS LIFE, I am just as interested in curating spaces, tending, stretching outside perceived boundaries and the imposition of borders.

In this life, I am a facilitator, teacher, an eternal student of beginnings. I bring with me, in all spaces, what I am *part of*. A host of educators and mentors: sky and ocean, currents and decay, my ancestral knowledge, imagination, and intuition—all teachers. In classrooms (institutional, virtual, communal, and personal), I look to the beginnings of things in order to get to the roots of our relationships, our collective growing.

And in all beginnings, Indigeneity.

In this unfolding era of *The New Pandemic*, I am asked to speak to a university's undergraduate class: *Indigenous Literature and Culture*. At 10 a.m. (and simultaneously, 1 p.m.) we gather on two coasts in our own living rooms, where most of us are visitors on native land. Between us and connecting us all, screens and digital transmissions. Students dutifully come prepared with the language of critical discourse to speak about the American Settler-Colonial Project, genuine in their desire to understand the evolution of current sociopolitical systems and their accompaniments of destruction and obvious imbalance and injustice. And from that condition of turmoil, the inevitable question arises: *Just what exactly are we to do about it?*

As for my part, visiting lecturer, I am asked to share my writing, art, and perspective on what *hope* I think there is to be had during these ever-fearful times, in which sovereignty and the basic human right of self-determination in Indigenous communities can seem, to some, discouragingly improbable. How do we not just survive but thrive in systems of extant colonial oppression and ownership, wherein responsibility to our homelands and its stewardship contend with governmental restrictions to basic land access and cultural autonomy?

So I ask the students in turn:

What does being Indigenous really mean?

What does education look like when we honor and acknowledge the Indigenous before all else?

IN ANOTHER CLASS, in a different time zone, in another interdisciplinary workshop, I lead activities based upon two art projects: *Current, I* and *The Unburden Project*. *Current, I* is a short film poem created for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center's "A Day in the Queer Life of Asian/Pacific America," which I made in response to the question, "As a queer Pacific Islander living in the world today, how are you doing?" *The Unburden Project* is an art installation I co-created with Portland artist Lisa Jarrett, a collaborative, personal exploration of creative ecologies and Indigenous identities, authority, and healing.

Current, I is a crudely cinematic (yet lushly sensory) engagement with land and water, as the visual poem questions the nature of our bodies' basic parts (water, electricity) and how those elements activate our relational awareness to all living things, including the cosmos and planet itself, while *The Unburden Project* asks participants to actively engage with and contribute to the literal ecology of my home garden, a space I cultivate as a visitor on Indigenous Miwok and Pomo land. While the film, for the audience, is perhaps an exercise in glimpsing my own understanding of ecological relationships and responsibilities, the interactive nature of *The Unburden Project* requires more direct action from the same audience, both physically and emotionally.

The Unburden Project begins with an invitation to plunge your hand into a bowl of soil that I have just shoveled from the ground outside the meeting space in which we are convening. As the bowl is passed around the room, we sift the soil with our fingers, press our faces to the scent, and breathe.

I ask questions: *What is the soil doing to our minds and bodies right now? Are we hesitant, and if so, why? How do we feel about sifting through soil as we are housed inside these walls made of concrete, steel, and glass—a space made to keep the earth outside?* I say, *Close your eyes. Think about a secret you have been harboring, one that is having a negative effect on your life.*

I say, *I don't want you to tell me (or anybody) your secret. Instead, I want you to think about why you're keeping such a secret. Who are you keeping it from?* I remind everyone to breathe. And breathe. I say, *When you're ready, if you trust me, write your secret down on the slip of rice paper I have provided. Crumple it up and deposit into the bowl of soil any time during our*

gathering. Then I read them some poems.

I ask participants to trust me. I ask them to trust themselves. I encourage them to imagine. To think of the earth and growing plants as an intuitive way of healing. I ask them to consider whether the power of the earth and growing things can transform something as powerful as shame within us, should we choose to make ceremony around its release. I ask them: *What does being Indigenous really mean? What does education look like when we honor and acknowledge the Indigenous before all else?*

What will happen is this: Someone will ask me what the point of all of this is. Someone will ask me whether I really believe this will make any difference at all. I will talk about ways of knowing. I will talk about what my ancestors have passed to me, regardless of what violence and incursions and systems of oppression have tried to undermine. I will speak about the differences in decolonizing and re-indigenizing.

Then. I will take the crumpled bits of rice paper home with me. I will treat them as if they are the secrets themselves. I will close my eyes and say words in my native language that conjure notions of release, peace, and transformation. I will compost the secrets in my garden, turn them over with worm castings and manure and the earth already there, awaiting our attention. In the space I have prepared, I will sow seeds.

All the while, the Wisteria will wend and coil ever nearer to the chicken coop. The chickens will scratch beneath the fig tree, bathing in dust and dappled sun. At least four crows will chase the fledgling hawk from the redwood tree. The slugs will meet in their meeting places and circle each other in an old, old dance of impetuous necessity and longing. The ocean breeze will make its way through the fields of mustard and red-winged blackbirds and bend the radish blossoms to the earth. I will quiet myself and try to slip seamlessly into the pace of the living earth. I will make the patterns of sky and water and plants my patterns.

When the cabbages or the cucumbers or the peppers are harvested, I will spiral into and out of this long ceremony by closing my eyes and thinking of all who made themselves vulnerable in the community we created one day, for a few hours, with secrets and the hope for transformation.

I will take slow bites. I will watch as the day turns to dusk, as blossoms fold into pods of seeds. I will say prayers of gratitude and ask the earth to please keep speaking, to please keep teaching.

NOTE

¹In his *The Genera of North American Plants and a Catalogue of the Species*, botanist Thomas Nuttall named the plant after a colleague, Caspar Wistar, in 1817.