Abstract

This paper approaches the imperial discourses of space and cartography as they are deconstructed in Naomi Iizuka’s 1999 play *Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls* through the framework of postcolonial theorists such as Graham Huggan and Walter Mignolo. This research examines some of the dramatic approaches Iizuka employs to challenge the hegemony of colonial cartography by establishing a planetary geography disloyal to any existing literal representation of space. Through a disidentification with imperial configurations of self and territory, Naomi Iizuka explores her characters’ ensuing journey to self-knowledge, location, and interconnection with the occupants of the planet and the cosmos, pulling apart the map as a hegemonic paradigm of knowledge.

Keywords: Iizuka. Cartography. Space. Identity. Deconstruction.

Written for the Humana festival of New American plays in 1999, *Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls* by Naomi Iizuka follows a cast of characters as they search for location, connection, and identity across multiple iconic American landscapes and natural environments - from New York City, Hawaii, and Alaska, to Borneo, the rainforest, and the edge of the universe. Across these landscapes Naomi Iizuka explores the intersection of space that is defined and tangible, with space that is undefined and malleable, speaking to a cognitive pattern of organizing territory that challenges our society’s current links between cartography, space, and the path to self-knowledge. *Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls*, although often overlooked by dramatists, has an immense potential for postcolonial
resistance and destabilization, highlighting the very important fact that literal geography is not synonymous with objectivity, but rather with imperialism. Furthermore, Iizuka demonstrates through this unique comedy of errors that cartographic hegemony has the power to decimate our sense of self and belonging, both within in society and the natural world, a dark legacy with roots in the Renaissance. Haunted by a veritable body of productions with scathingly bad reviews, *Aloha* is often set aside as an experimental exercise with potentially serious flaws in its structure, but with so many allegedly failed attempts at cracking open this play perhaps what is needed is a new approach to understanding the reconfigured world Iizuka has created. What is needed for *Aloha* is reclamation into the body of postcolonial drama and theatre.

As Graham Huggan reminds us when it comes to postcolonial literature “...the map is often identified, then parodied and/or ironized, as a spurious definitional construct, thereby permitting the writer to engage in a more wide-ranging deconstruction of Western signifying systems.” Therefore, we can locate *Aloha* within postcolonial literature as it is a play that deconstructs the literal configurations of territory and planetary geography in favour of exploring the relationship between identity and subjective experiences of space and time. *Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls* adopts the discourses of post colonialism by deconstructing literal maps to reveal their stronghold over our sense of self and destiny, by destabilizing the centricity and superiority of human beings in relationship to territory and space, and by giving primacy to the subjective experiences of space over any literal descriptions of space as a method of

---

social and personal location, all in the attempt to decolonize human identity from the imposed illusion of universal knowledge and homogeneity imbricated within contemporary cartographic discourse.

Throughout the play Iizuka creates a transformative, in-between space that at times takes on the form of darkness and oblivion, while at other times becomes the inner Bornean jungle, the cosmos, or the uncharted space at the edge of the map where there be dragons – komodo dragons in the case of this strange play. However, in all its multifarious manifestations, this undefined space is constantly pressing at the boundaries of the physical environs of Aloha, threatening to overtake it with expanding foliage, darkness, light, carnivorous predators, and mysterious jungle creatures – sometimes all at once. Iizuka holds no loyalty to literal geology as Hawaii, Alaska, and Borneo are territorially re-arranged to be within swimming distance of each other. Characters may step from one volcanic landscape into another, collapsing immense expanses of geological space through small elapses of time and movement. A character may appear in one location momentarily and then suddenly appear in another distant region, creating a perceptual destabilization for the characters: “is it christmas already? i think i’m a little confused about time. i think i’m also a little bit confused about space.” ii This bleeding of environments, augmented by the repeated sound cue of the Hawaiian surf transmuting into an Alaskan snowstorm generated onstage by the actors’ voices as per the author’s requirements, opens a path to new configurations of identity in relation to new understandings of the discourses of space.

---

ii Naomi Iizuka, Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls (New York: Playscripts, Inc., 1999), 61; lowercase letters are the playwright’s choice throughout.
Iizuka presents a similar poetic treatment of time where the distant geological past and the infinity of the cosmos can be accessed from the present as the time and spatial boundaries, the mapped territories, between them do not need to be upheld. For some characters time moves too quickly to follow or track, while others may experience time as a regression of millions of years, devolving back into an ancient reptilian form. Other characters are transported to the edge of the universe devoid of matter as they oscillate from extreme intimacy to extreme solitude and self-questioning. All throughout Iizuka’s interplay of space, time, and cartography, a post colonial discourse begins to emerge that speaks to a malleable relationship between the personal experience of space and achieving social location, human connection, personal destiny, and self-knowledge.

Going against the contradictory logic of contemporary Western maps of the city, the planet, and the universe that seek containment and control while simultaneously dividing humans with borders and distance, Iizuka demonstrates “the attempt by writers [. . .] to project spaces other than, or by writers . . . to articulate the spaces between, those prescribed by dominant cultures or cultural groups indicates a resistance to the notion of cartographic enclosure and to the imposed cultural limits that notion implies,” iii an idea we shall explore in-depth in this analysis.

To begin, let us first unpack the politics of territorial organization and understand that the fixity of the map is an illusion. In the case of Aloha, Iizuka is speaking predominantly against the Western tradition of mapmaking that has become the foundation for a global cognitive bias of personal, geographical, and cultural spatial

---

iii Huggan, Decolonizing the Map, 27.
organization. According to poststructuralist philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix
Gauttari,

the map is open and connectable in all its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to
constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an
individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on the wall, conceived as a work of art,
constructed as a political action or as a meditation.iv

Iizuka takes existing contemporary maps of the world and the cosmos and rips
them into pieces before dispersing her cast of misfits across these new and inconsistent
arrangements of tectonic plates and galaxies, creating a spatial rendering that has
immense political implications as it openly challenges the map as an irrefutable paradigm
of knowledge. Huggan speaks of the political importance of the deconstruction of
cartography in his 2013 article “Decolonizing the Map: Postcolonialism,
Poststructuralism and the Cartographic Connection”:

The usefulness of deconstruction in exposing and undermining systems of this kind suggests that,
rather than being perceived as a decontextualized theory which leads to a form of political
quietism through its deferral of the decisions that might engender social change, a form of
philosophical anarchism through its consistent refutation of ‘standard’ wisdoms, or a paradoxical
reinforcement of Western authoritarianism through its disguised relocation of, rather than its
alleged dislocation of, Western ontological and epistemological biases, deconstruction can by
contrast be considered as a contextualized praxis which enables the exercise of cultural critique
and, in particular, the exposure of and resistance to forms of cultural dominationv

Huggan suggests that by deconstructing existing maps of the world Iizuka opens
fissures for cultural critique and resistance to “forms of cultural domination” in the
landscapes of Aloha; she is offering us the opportunity to re-think location in all its
implications and significations, both material and immaterial. It can therefore be argued
that Aloha is asking us to reform our personal connection between cartography and our
access to human connection, alienation, and identity because “if the map is conceived of

iv Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and
Schizophrenia (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 12.
v Huggan, Decolonizing the Map, 26.
in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms as a rhizomatic (‘open’) rather than as a falsely homogeneous (‘closed’) construct, the emphasis then shifts from de- to reconstruction, from mapbreaking to mapmaking.”

We must recognize that borders and territorial limits as they currently exist on both physical maps along with the perceived barriers of time hinder the development of human relationships by diminishing our power to achieve personal destiny and location through subjective experiences because of the imperial forms of knowledge, power, and cognition they inherently perpetuate.

To delve into Iizuka’s exploration of the connection between space and personal destiny let us look to the peculiarities of the locales and the characters within this play. Act one takes place in the various urban environs of New York City that are repeatedly described as miniscule: “a miniscule apartment in the city,” “a miniscule pet store,” “JASON, MARTIN, and DEREK are squeezed in together in a too tiny space,” etc.; the miniaturization of these spaces is further highlighted by the appearance of “giant” props within them such as a giant terrarium, a giant house plant or a giant komodo dragon piñata. If the space isn’t miniscule and encumbering, it’s deserted and devoid of any signs of life, such as the city park bench or the subway platform. What is important to understand about the nature of Iizuka’s urban spaces and is that they force the people living inside of them into such close proximity that everything becomes agitated and distorted, the people can no longer relate to themselves and each other. Objects are able to dominate. Demarcation incites suffocation. People become dysfunctional. Isolation becomes profound. This alienation initialized by the suffocating proximity of urban

---

vi Huggan, Decolonizing the Map, 29.
vii Iizuka, Aloha, 7.
viii Ibid., 10.
ix Ibid., 12.
planning is best exemplified by the character Derek moments before he tricks Martin, the man-dog, to jump out of the window by throwing a rare steak into the oblivion.

DEREK: i can’t take it anymore. i’m beginning to unravel, i’m beginning to come apart at the seams. . . . i don’t know. nothing, nothing at all. you’re right. i’m wrong. what am i thinking? i don’t know what i am thinking. i’m a little addled. i’m not myself. i don’t know who i am.

We can see that things are destabilized for this man who cannot finish the autobiographical manuscript, the personal history, he is attempting to write; he is severed from his ability to know himself. Derek is stifled not only by a system and structure of minimal physical space arguably imposed by the forces of globalization, industrialization and urbanization, but also by the imposition of a binary that places the urban world in diametric opposition to the natural world via urban cartography. For example, if we visualize a map of New York City there is a firm, linear boundary between the city and Central Park, a hard physical line between the urban and the natural, which becomes an internalized division giving rise to extreme agitation, confusion, and isolation as all the facets of identity become bifurcated and fragmented. Iizuka drives this point home by surrounding Derek’s apartment, not with the space of the city and the street below, but with an oblivion that is tangibly endless: “DEREK opens a window, and wings the piece of meat into oblivion. the whistle of a missile shot out into the void. MARTIN exits after it. DEREK shuts window,” thereby demonstrating the deeply penetrating isolation and agitation of these beings.

The oblivion is not only a representation and interpretation of seclusion - the physical and symbolic distance between the characters that they must journey across to

---


*Ibid.*, 13
reach each other – but also the undefined space where there is no fixity. Without spatial
fixity, Iizuka destroys cartographic hegemony, and without hegemony new
configurations between space and identity can emerge. The oblivion that Iizuka has
created becomes the cracks in the physical space and its corresponding discourses
inviting reflection, redirection, and reorientation in terms of self-knowledge, social
location and, by extension, cultural position. As further evidence, all the characters of
_Aloha_ to varying degrees reflect a similar spatial experience of confinement,
denaturalization, and isolation:

> MYRNA: vivian, you are the architect of your own destiny.
> VIVIAN: i don’t know what that means. what does that mean?
> MYRNA: you are the lone wildebeest at the edge of the herd.
> VIVIAN: wow. where is my herd? i think my herd is hiding. i have a brother, but
> i think he’s maybe in a different herd.
> MYRNA: face it, honey: you have no herd. you’re herdless. people sense this.
>    they smell it off your skin like a pheromone

As we can see, cartographic discourse and Iizuka’s representation of New York
City as a “too tiny space” isolated from the natural world alienates human beings further
by placing them as creatures separate from, and without ties to, the natural world as
exemplified by the aforementioned failure of man and dogs to co-exist, and the failure of
Vivian to assimilate into her herd. The cartographic discourse that segregates the natural
from the urban is pushed to extremes in this case because not only do we have Derek who
cannot function in the presence of the natural world without feeling threatened – “hate, i
hated that dog, because in my heart of hearts, i knew that dog was smarter, and stronger,
and more highly evolved than i will ever hope to be, and that just sucks, because i’m a
human being, i’m a homo-sapien for chrissakes, i should be king of the hill, i should

---

xii Iizuka, _Aloha_, 22.
rule"xiii – we also have Vivian who has literally been separated from her place of belonging. As a final illustration of the devastating effects of definitively demarcating the urban and the natural, Iizuka gives us the character Martin whose very identity as a species is fragmented as he struggles to understand the borderlands of the urban and the natural within himself: “woof. woof. what. what. what am i? what am i? where am i? who am i? am i a man? or am i a dog? or am i a dog who thinks i’m a man who thinks i’m a dog?”xiv Iizuka cleverly weaves the oblivion through the physical space and its provisional discourses to demonstrate the seclusion they bring with them, creating a new map of the urban space where undefined, uncharted territory that carries no prescribed fixity or desire to cultivate the human being challenges the unity of the urban space and its discourses of power:

The dual tendencies towards geographical dispersal . . . and cultural decentralization . . . can therefore be seen within the context of a resisting of the traditional ‘mimetic fallacy’ of cartographic representation. The map no longer features as a visual paradigm for the ontological anxiety arising from frustrated attempts to define a national culture, but rather as a locus of productive dissimilarity where the provisional connections of cartography suggest an ongoing perceptual transformation which, in turn, stresses the transitional nature of postcolonial discourse xv

Furthermore regarding destiny, Iizuka sees this urban environment, this particular cartographic discourse of space and self, as endowed with a set of normative desires reflective of urbanization. Imposed on the residents living within the urban territory of act one are desires and destinies such as the achievement of marriage, wealth, sex, and artistic success, from which the characters are unable to escape. “Imaginary constructions take on, over time, ontological dimensions; descriptions of an object become the object

---

xiii Ibid., 28.
xiv Izuka, Aloha, 21.
xv Huggan, Decolonizing the Map, 28.
itself,” as demonstrated by the tension between who these characters are and who they feel they should be. This phenomenon of imposed destiny and the disorienting effect it has on the identity of Aloha’s characters is demonstrated by Huggan’s sentiments that “. . . cartographic discourse, I would argue, is also characterized by the discrepancy between its authoritative status and its approximative function, a discrepancy which marks out the “recognizable totality” of the map as a manifestation of the desire for control rather than as an authenticating seal of coherence,” meaning that mapping and cartography reflect a desire to cultivate and control those within it, it does not provide coherence or stability. Iizuka is creating a discontinuity between the space as it exists on a map, demarcated from the natural world with human beings as its central and only occupants, with the potential for self-authored understandings of our relationship to space outside the institutions of cartography, urbanization, and globalization.

DEREK: fate, you know, i think about fate. And i think, what i think is that i don’t believe in fate. i think, i think everything is kinda random, and also that the rules of time and space, which i think we often take for granted, are really kinda unreliable and strange

The urban space and spatiality of Aloha has imbricated its material manifestations and existence with an immaterial sense of destiny and desire, and has further made the execution of those desires and destinies impossible by pushing the threshold of containment to the point where the proximity between people is so reduced that the distance between them is paradoxically increased by their own feelings of alienation – another discontinuity between space as it exists and space as it is experienced. Iizuka challenges this phenomenon by loosening the grip between place of birth and prescribed

---


xvii Huggan, Decolonizing the Map, 23.

xviii Izuka, Aloha, 56.
personal fate, between maps and reality, by rewriting her own configurations of space that negotiate physical reality, maps, experience and subjectivity because “... maps are and are not the territory. They are not, because they do not reflect any essential reality of the shape of the earth or of the cosmos. They are because, once they are accepted, they become a powerful tool for controlling territories, colonizing the mind and imposing themselves on the members of the community using the map as a real territory.”xix

Iizuka challenges physical, psychological and cultural borders by infiltrating this cartography and its inherent discourses with her use of the undefined space as a jungle that pushes back against spatial demarcation. Witness an excerpt of her sound cues that recur between almost every scene transition throughout the entire play: “the sound of animals in the jungle. strange birds. molting snakes;”xx “a ruckus in the jungle;” xxi “the roar of stampeding elephants;”xxii “a loud staccato caw caw;” xxiii “the sound of predators. the howling of small prey;”xxiv “a burst of simian activity. chaos in the jungle;” xxv “the sound of a large raptor going in for the kill. the flapping of feathers. the shriek of a small mammal;”xxvi “the sound of unseen animals prowling in the dark. panic in the jungle;” xxvii etc.. What these sounds serve to do, complimented with the appearance of reptiles, small mammals, primates, amphibians, and a houseplant with unprecedented growth, is to fragment the discursive power of cartographic oppression in

xix Mignolo, The Darker Side, 237.
xx Iizuka, Aloha, 9.
xxi Ibid., 12.
xxii Ibid., 15.
xxiii Ibid., 23.
xxiv Ibid., 24.
xxv Ibid., 25.
xxvi Ibid., 27.
xxvii Ibid.

Hic Sunt Dracones
Tonya Rae Chrystian
all its implications by returning to the diversity and chaos of the jungle, of the natural
world, as a force that deconstructs maps and space since “[. . .] deconstruction [i]s a
process of displacement which registers as attempted dissociation from a dominant
discursive system and decolonization as a process of cultural transformation which
involves the ongoing critique of colonial discourse.”

The characters are able to detach
themselves from prescribed destiny and dominant patterns of cognition imposed by the
spatiality of the city as a dense, homogenous environment with prescribed fates and
knowledge since the jungle becomes “. . . a shift of emphasis away from the desire for
homogeneity towards an acceptance of diversity reflected in the interpretation of the map,
not as a means of spatial containment or systematic organization, but as a medium of
spatial perception which allows for the reformulation of links both within and between
cultures” and individuals.

The use of the jungle to destabilize geography further serves to detach the
characters from their perceived position as the zenith being, paralleling and challenging
the notion of an ethnic center altogether - a concept often inherent in cartography. Iizuka
declares that human beings do not neutrally observe space and time, but rather
unintentionally adopt imperial forms of knowledge. This jungle environment is one of
the most competitive, chaotic, random, and diverse environments on earth, a fact Iizuka
reminds us of when the character Will is eaten offstage by a velociraptor. This dangerous
jungle is consistently pushing against the physical space, exemplifying the notion that
there is more than one entity fighting for the center position of power, and more
importantly that political centrality and discursive dominance are always challenged and

xxviii Huggan, Decolonizing the Map, 24
xxix Ibid., 28.
never guaranteed; stability and superiority are illusions. Iizuka not only challenges the superiority of human beings over the natural world, but also challenges the boundaries between humans and the species themselves as the character Pete transitions from a human being to a komodo dragon, problematizing species-based superiority entirely.

Iizuka is using the jungle to dismantle a hegemonic structure of the world and its corresponding territories because in place of central, authoritative, and reliable observers of space and time she opts instead for a matrix of interconnectivity between humans, the species, and the planet’s geography. At the end of the Aloha there is no certainty as to what being or configuration has emerged as triumphant.

Throughout Aloha Iizuka detaches physical space as it exists from physical space as it is described or experienced, giving primacy to subjective experiences of space over any descriptions of space (maps), or real arrangements of space (planetary geography). A particularly revealing moment of this argument occurs in the final moments of act one:

VIVIAN: “i like maps so much. i like how everything is pink and orange and aquamarine, and all the countries and states look like little, funny-shaped candies. i like how all the names of the places are written in these perfect, block letters. i like that. maps tell you where you are, and how to get to where you’re going. but the thing about a map, the best thing of all, you look at it, and places that are really big and far away, don’t seem so big and far away. a whole continent is the distance from your thumb to your fingertip. a whole ocean is as big as the palm of your hand. magic. truly”

Here we see, with her own brand of humor and lightness, Iizuka entering into “the distinction between the materiality of nature and culture, on the one hand, and the human description of it in their constant transformation and adaptation to the natural and social environment, on the other, [a]s one way of solving the old philosophical problem cast in terms of realism versus idealism or the conflict between the world and the word.”

---

xxx Iizuka, Aloha, 38.
xxxi Mignolo, The Darker Side, 227.

Hic Sunt Dracones
Tonya Rae Chrystian
deconstruct the illusion of maps as literal or true representations of space in the above monologue, Iizuka first highlights the iconicity and aesthetics of cartography by addressing the candy-colored sections of land and the particular fonts used to label the different pieces. Iizuka then further breaks the illusion of maps as “truth” when Vivian acknowledges that the oceans are only the size of her hand and the continents only stretch the length of her finger, splitting apart spatial description and geological reality. The next radical thing Iizuka does is make this perception into an unstable geological reality throughout the entire second act as Hawaii, Alaska and the ever-present jungle begin to bleed together, showing us for the last time that we are in no way condemned to printed maps and their provisional discourses of space and self-knowledge. If we can conceive of the world in a collapsed, geographically accessible form then we can also experience it as such, without any loyalty to imperial, literal conceptions of the planet’s mapped territories.

This new configuration based on personal perception and interpretation of the map permits the characters to begin finding each other, coming together in larger groups, learning about their location and self-hood as they enter and exit each other’s lives without the rigidity of boundaries of any kind – time, spatial, personal, or cosmic. This reworking of volcanic landscapes becomes the geographical counterpart of the search for self and allows us as spectators to “identify the spaces in between produced by colonization as location and energy of new modes of thinking whose strength lies in the transformation and critique of the ‘authenticities’” of cartographic discourses. This configuration deconstructs artificiality and in doing so reveals the significance of not

xxxxii Mignolo, The Darker Side, XV.
submitting to borders or organizations of space endowed with personal destiny and desire, but rather the necessity to chart our own territories to understand the interweaving of our personal history with our personal understanding of space and location. *Aloha* is demonstrating to us that creative revision is the first step in finding connection and that . . . the map topos can be seen in this context as a specific instance of creative revisionism in which the desystematization of a narrowly defined and demarcated ‘cartographic’ space allows for a culturally and historically located critique of colonial discourse while, at the same time, producing the momentum for a projection and exploration of ‘new territories’ outlawed for neglected by dominant discourses that previously operated in the colonial, but now continue to operate in modified or transposed forms in the postcolonial culture. I would suggest further that . . . these territories correspond to a series of new or revised rhetorical spaces occupied by *feminism, regionalism* and *ethnicity*, where each of these items is understood primarily as a set of counter-discursive strategies which challenge the claims of, or avoid circumscription within, one or other form of cultural centrismxxxiii

To draw to a conclusion the spatial reconfiguration within *Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls* posits some radical challenges to the cartographic connections between space, time, and self-knowledge, problematizing stability and fixity in ways that is alienating and uncomfortable, but also allowing for new understandings and locations to emerge. Although often overlooked as a masterpiece work, *Aloha* wrestles with the observation that “the beach is big and the world is small,” xxxiv emerging with a reconfiguration of space and identity that is not loyal to any existing cartography, or even to itself. Iizuka successfully cracks open the entire knowledge-space dynamic on multiple levels. It is fair to summate Iizuka’s treatment of the knowledge-space connection by saying that cartography contains within it a creative effort that simultaneously acknowledges the implications of colonial space on identity while transitioning to a postcolonial understanding of territory and borderlands that breaks apart the spatial discourses of power. Iizuka shows us that maps can be fragmenting in their colonial forms but also that

---

xxxiii Huggan, *Decolonizing the Map*, 30.
xxxiv Iizuka, *Aloha*, 41.
the world cannot be contained and conceived in a fixed way when it comes to selfhood and self-knowledge. The human being is not the unchallenged source of power in the universe in this world. By deconstructing the map we take the first steps on the journey to undoing the pre-determined versions of ourselves, coming into the process of colonial disidentification, even if it means re-evolving into our ancient reptilian form.

**Bibliography**


**About the Author**

Tonya Rae Chrystian is a dramatist trained at the University of Alberta and l’École Intenionale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq in Paris, France; she is co-founder of *mindhive collective* and works in all facets of theatre and drama including academia, directing, performing, and dramaturgy. With a particular interest in theatre as a meeting place of language, knowledge, and bodies, Tonya approaches her discipline as a medium to confront silence and address fear, but one that requires a ceaseless desire to search: what is it about? How can it go further?