
Sally Engle Merry: An Appreciation from Hawai'i

Marilyn Brown

No doubt, many of these memorial essays for Sally Merry will focus on her scholarly contributions to a field shaped largely by her over the past 40 years or so. As a former student of hers at Wellesley College, my essay falls into a different category of remembrance of Sally. Her influence in my life was so great that I can't tell that story without sharing some of my own.

When I arrived as a major in the Anthropology Department in September of 1989, I wasn't what anyone would call a typical Wellesley student. I was 34 years old, the daughter of working-class parents, neither of whom had a high school diploma. I'd transferred to Wellesley after graduating from a small women's junior college in Hartford, Connecticut. Happily, I had lots of choices in where to go next but no real rationale of why. At that time, what were the remnants of the Seven Sisters all seemed to be looking for me. Women, who maybe had an unsuccessful start at college long ago or hadn't had the opportunity at all, were a target demographic. But, still, me, right? I very clearly recall the doubtful look on my mother's face when I told her that I'd applied to Smith, Mt. Holyoke, and Wellesley as transfer options, a look that said that maybe I'd overreached. The not-so-hidden injuries of class in my mother's life were very apparent that day. But I was a believer and once Sally came along, I was ready.

I knew that Sally was a popular professor at Wellesley. I was completely unaware of her rock-star status as a scholar. Anyway, I had only a shadowy grasp on where all of this education was leading me. I only knew one thing, that I loved being in college and Sally's work was thrilling. I can't say what she saw in me but in a short time, I found myself working as her research assistant. Her direction was always open-ended, giving me the latitude to explore where my interest took me. At that time, Sally was turning her eyes toward the colonial project in Hawai'i and its

Please direct all correspondence to Marilyn Brown, University of Hawai'i at Hilo
200 W. Kawili St. Hilo, HI 96720. e-mail: marilyn@hawaii.edu.

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outcomes to the present day. Her two-pronged approach included the establishment of American legal institutions in nineteenth-century Hawai'i, as well as a contemporary study on how contemporary courts in Hawai'i addressed domestic violence. As her research assistant on this National Science Foundation-funded grant, things got real when we arrived in Hilo in July of 1991. Until then, I'd spent time reading district court cases from the nineteenth century from judges' minute books, taking notes. We'd engage in long, nerdy conversations about the development of the Western juridical gaze into the everyday infractions of the Kingdom's "native subjects" as well as in the lives of immigrant workers recruited to work on the Island's plantations. I really tried to keep up. It wasn't easy.

I have a few photos from those early days doing anthropology in Hawai'i, nearly 30 years ago. In one, Sally is mugging for the camera one morning before a long day of fieldwork. She'd rented us a house in lower Puna, a rural district where, we were informed, many of the local businesses had their roots in the marijuana industry of the 1970s and 1980s. Quite a story in itself. But what we were after on that trip was the remnant stamp of Hawaii's plantation past, visiting local families who traced their roots back to migrant ancestors from the Philippines, Japan, Puerto Rico, or maybe the Azores.

Our interviews then were pretty unstructured and we were grateful to our hosts who invited Sally and me to their homes and served us lau lau, poi, teri beef, and macaroni salad with way too much mayonnaise. Yes, we were outsiders and didn't pretend otherwise, but Sally's style in these encounters was both light and deft, with an easy humor always ready to surface. We were always made welcome and Sally made many enduring friendships along the way.

An avid hiker, she introduced me to walking the hot and sometimes still steaming lava fields on the Island. She was indefatigable and I came to call these sometimes excruciating excursions "death marches," something we'd often laugh about over the years. My discomfort was buffered by the free-wheeling conversations we'd have about governmentality or colonial theory, or whatever I might possibly be doing in the future (about which I knew equally little).

Sally and I remained friends over the ensuing decades, through my years of grad school, and my own career teaching Sociology at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo. I'd visit her at home in Wellesley whenever I was in New England. She'd make me lunch and we'd reminisce about those days on the Big Island, and talk about how I never imagined that someday I'd end up teaching here. I ended up marrying, making wonderful

friendships, and now and again made a contribution in my own field. Along the way, Sally was always my North Star even when we were an ocean and a continent apart. Many others will write appreciations of her scholarship and I have to admit sometimes being starstruck by Sally as much as I loved her as a friend. Who could help it?

Students here at UH Hilo sometimes call their professors “kumu.” It means teacher, of course, but it also means source. It should be clear by now that Sally was my kumu. People in Hawai‘i are also very aware of genealogy. Who do you come from, and where are you from? A genealogy tells people what you have to offer today as well as to the coming generations. Sometimes, I like to reflect that my students are part of an enviable intellectual line. I like to imagine, especially now, that what I have to offer is much of what my kumu gave me. It gives me confidence. Having taught here on the Big Island for many years, I see my students in positions of leadership in the community. Many have made the same leap as I did from first-generation college student to educated men and women with a sharp sense of their responsibility to others. That’s the way it is here. As ourselves, we’re not “all that,” it’s about our position in a chain of lives and how we raise the aspirations of those who come after. Sally’s gifts are at work here in this beautiful place that she loved. Of that, I have no doubt.

In July, Sarah Merry wrote to say that Sally had been trying to get in touch with me, and the three of us ended up talking on the phone. Sally was somewhat breathless and it was clear that her health was failing. Nevertheless, in good spirits, she and I laughed again about those arduous hikes across the lava fields long ago. She told me later in an email that she wanted to come back to Hawai‘i and I wanted to think that she would. In this moment, I wish that I had spent more time telling my students about their intellectual genealogy, their source. If my coming here to Hawai‘i has been a boon to them in any way, much of that’s down to Sally, of course. Now I realize that in talking about my dear Sally, I’ve spent way too much time talking about myself. Sally would probably think (but not say), “what is this, a review of *It’s a Wonderful Life*”? Well, something like that. But in memory, our departed loved ones’ influences are sometimes so interwoven with our own as to be somewhat indistinguishable. Her gifts to me and to her many other students (handed through us in turn to many others) are the hallmark of Sally’s legacy. Aloha a hui hou, Kumu Sally. Rest in peace, you endure here forever in the place you loved.

Marilyn Brown is Professor of Sociology at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, where she has taught since 2003. Her research, teaching, and consulting focus on issues associated with prisoner reentry.