

JOE BALAZ

Hawaiian Islands Pidgin Visual and Textual Poetry

Abstract

Joe Balaz—a writer, visual artist, and active advocate for Hawaiian Islands Pidgin (HIP)—discusses the reception of his HIP poems and art by literary magazines around the world, and presents examples of his published creative works.

Keywords: *Hawai'i, Pidgin, Hawaiian Islands Pidgin, Hawai'i Creole English, poetry, visual poetry, contemporary art, diaspora*

In 2015, the United States Census Bureau declared that Hawaiian Islands Pidgin, a Creole variant of English, was officially a language. This anticlimactic announcement was largely ignored by people who grew up in Hawai'i. It was a tiny blip of information that offered a bit of comedy; the proclamation by the federal government agency was like telling a large number of people that a language that they currently speak—the same language that their ancestors spoke—was now suddenly legitimate, copacetic, and acceptable. (By the way, in case you hadn't noticed, the sky is blue, when it is not painted cloudy and gray, and the sun rises in it every morning.)

Due to decades of stereotypes, misinformed labeling, and an unfortunate lack of necessary knowledge about what is an innovative, multicultural adaptation of the English language, a ridiculous and negative interpretation of Pidgin was imposed upon the greater society.

The former identification of Hawaiian Islands Pidgin as “Hawai'i Creole English” and its acronym (HCE) are archaic and obsolete to me—especially now that HIP is an “official language” (and I say this with a bit of sarcasm, knowing that it has always been official). Times have changed. In the future, I will continually express this point by not referring to those old identifiers anymore. I have used them in the past, even in the immediate past, to help shepherd along new, unfamiliar, but curious eyes and ears to fully realize what Hawaiian Islands Pidgin is.

HIP, the new and appropriate acronym that I am adding to the Pidgin lexicon, is a very positive lingo that has a rich past, and it will constantly evolve into a richer future. Its value to communicate effectively, and be incorporated into a dynamic literary and artistic movement, is evident in the Hawaiian Islands Pidgin literature and art that has already been produced. Imaginative people who speak it—and who understand its significance as a language that reflects the world that surrounds them—have succeeded in creating this literature and art. I have long recognized that Hawaiian Islands Pidgin is a very sophisticated language. Since its birth in the early nineteenth century, it has grown in complexity, enabling people from various ethnic and language backgrounds to create a singular language that all of them can understand.

I think of Pidgin as if it were a form of linguistic jazz. Similar to jazz, it is free flowing and growing, like a saxophone blowing random and rhythmic droplets of rain into your brain. Get hip to HIP, as you listen and hear what it is telling you.

I am an active advocate for Hawaiian Islands Pidgin. As a writer and artist, I have had the pleasure of being published by a number of progressive editors nationally and internationally. These editors and their inclusive platforms are providing new avenues for the appreciation of the growing expressive creativity from Hawai'i.

I reiterate: What I am bringing forth is actually what I have been working on for some time now, which is to expand Hawaiian Islands Pidgin literature and art as far as global reception will take it. You have to first move forward with something substantial to make your case. I, and others who create literary and art works in HIP, have clearly shown this over the years.

There is a transition point at which the uninformed truly realize and can become enlightened. That sea change is now. A cumulative breakthrough of what needed to be broken through and stated as obvious has already occurred. Hawaiian Islands Pidgin is a language. It always has been. It began in the earliest moments of its multicultural creation, so that people brought together quickly under different circumstances as immigrants were able to communicate effectively with each other, because it was vitally necessary to do so to survive in a new society.

A few years ago, in pondering some of the themes of the then-upcoming 2018 symposium “Pacific Island Worlds: Transpacific Dis/Positions—Crosscurrents in Indigenous, Diasporic and Colonial Histories of Oceania,” I came up with an idea of what I could present at the event. I asked the editors of some of the different literary and art magazines that I appeared in, why they published my writing and art in Pidgin. I inquired as to how those works, as examples of Hawaiian Islands Pidgin creativity, fit into their collective vision of the contemporary

literature and art that they were publishing. I was curious about their viewpoints and their decisions to offer poetry and art that was written in and created with a particularly local variant of the English language to an audience that had most likely never been exposed to Hawaiian Islands Pidgin before. In sharing the responses of these different editors, I essentially became an intermediary to my own work, and in doing so, I interspersed a few of my HIP poems and art images into a presentation. I have incorporated those relevant ideas from that 2018 presentation into the narrative that you are now reading. Here is a new poem to take you over a bridge and into that narrative:

WEN I STAY SPEAKING

I know of wat I speak
wen I stay speaking.

So as I profess
wat I going profess

wit intellect kine analysis
using good relatable stuff

we going see wat we going see.

I going bust out
wun manifesto

and we going presto
change-o da lingo.

By all kine means and scenes
and nuts and bolts too

I have nutting against
da eggheads.

On da contrary
we can coexist quite nicely

to open minds

to wun blue-collar
and grassroots perspective.

Some of da best universities
I've ever been to and attended

are located

in neighborhood bars
and living rooms.

So wen we mix

all da varied philosophies
and dissertations togettah

tings going be bettah
in da long run foa everybody.

Mark Young, the editor of *Otoliths*, an online and print literary and art magazine in Australia, had this to say about why he had published my work: "Because it's good poetry. Also, it has enough in common with standard English to be able to stand alone, to be understood with ease, with only an extremely minimal glossary required. *Otoliths* has an eclectic selection of contributions. Poetry written in Hawaiian Islands Pidgin fits in quite comfortably."¹

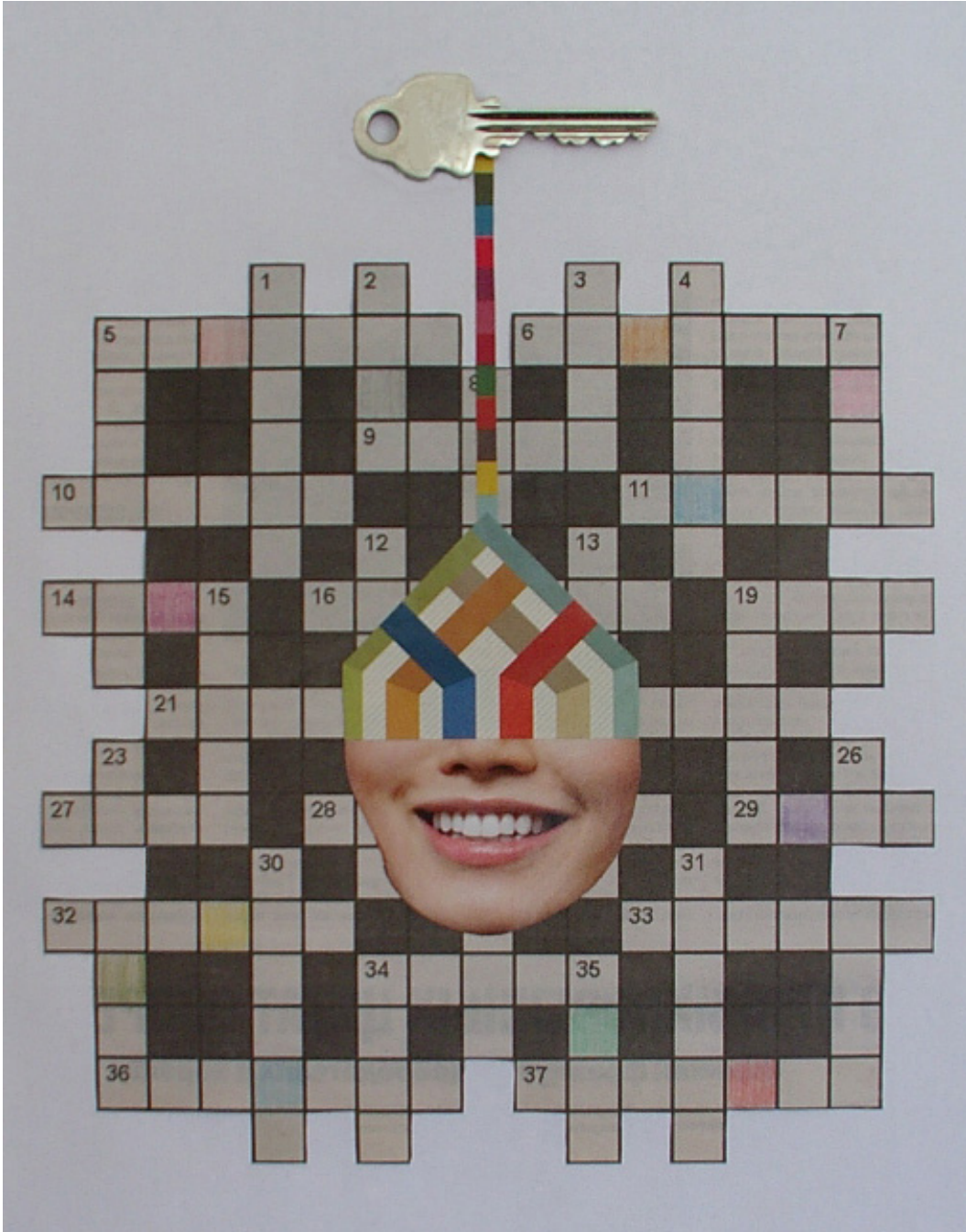


Figure 1. Joe Balaz, *Figuring Out Pidgin*, 2018.² Digital photomontage and mixed media. Courtesy of the artist

“Bite Da Eye” is one of the many Pidgin poems of mine that has been published in *Otoliths*.³ Before reading the poem, there are some terms that you should be aware of. “Haole” is a Hawaiian word that formerly described any foreign person but came to more commonly signify a white person. “Ono kine grinds”

means good food. The word “squid” has become a local slang term in Hawai‘i; when a person says that they are going fishing for squid, they actually mean octopus.

When old time fishermen in Hawai‘i speared an octopus, they would immediately cup the head of the sea animal, bite the eyes with their teeth, and then quickly flip the head inside out. Cupping, biting, and flipping the head inside out would be done in one swift action. This would immobilize the octopus, and you wouldn’t have tentacles grabbing you all over the place. When I used to skin dive, I speared many an octopus with a three-prong Hawaiian sling and it was always an effort getting the sea creatures off of the spear shaft because the animal would be grabbing and holding on tight with its suction cups. I never tried the bite and flip method. Octopus have very strong, parrot-like beaks. I didn’t like the idea of biting something that could bite me back. Those old-time fishermen knew what they were doing.

BITE DA EYE

Wen we wen buss out
wit all da local kine slang

da haoles at da adah tables

wen look at each of us
like we had two heads—

we might as well have been from Pluto.

Dey wuz listening
to two island expatriates

one from Ohio
and one from Michigan

talking wit da visitor from Hawai‘i.

Da Pidgin flew like wun strange bird
in dat small breakfast café in Ann Arbor.

Wen da waitress wen bring da pancakes
dat wuz as big as da plate dey wuz on

da island vernacular wen flap its wings.

“Ho, dose buggahs are huge!”

And wen she wen arrive
wit my order of hash browns, eggs, and ham,

I wen announce aftah I wen try ‘um,

“Ono kine grinds, brah,
and da ham not dat salty!”

We wuz talking story
in dat same familiar language

about da place
wheah we wen all grow up.

Anykine stuff

from spearfishing and bodysurfing
to da secrets of catching squid.

“Yeah, brah,

you bite da eye
and den you turn da squid head inside out.”

Wun haole lady
at wun nearby table heard dat

and she had wun look on her face
like she wuz tinkin,

“What the hell are these people
talking about?”

It shall remain wun mystery to her

cause we wen bite da eye
and we wen also bite da ears.

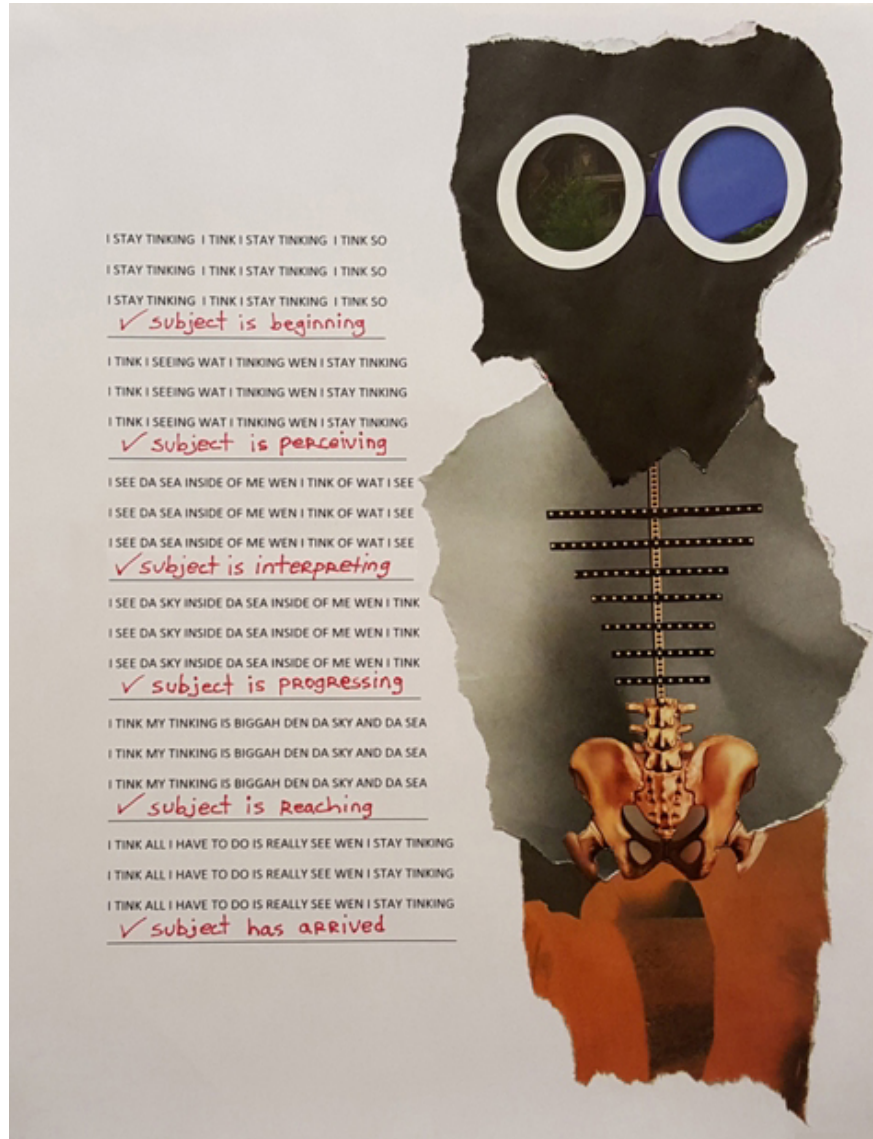


Figure 2. Joe Balaz, *Meditative Da Kine*, 2015.⁴ Digital photomontage and mixed media. Courtesy of the artist

Another editor who shared his insights is Jack Little, a person who has dual citizenship in the United Kingdom and Mexico. He edits *The Ofi Press Magazine*,

an online publication based in Mexico City. He had this to say about Hawaiian Islands Pidgin:

It's an interesting language, and having this dialect finally recognised as an official language is surely worthy of recognition. In my part of the north of England, we have a very particular dialect and I have always been interested in the use of local languages in the written form. I love that this poem celebrates such an important moment and that it is in a form of English that I had never come across before, and certainly never read.

A lot of the work that we publish [is] from writers with a dual cultural background who may be writing in English as a second language. This leads to some very interesting uses of words, phrases and expressions. I love how the English language is always evolving . . . and Joe's poems are making a valuable contribution to this.⁵

Here is one of the poems that *The Ofi Press Magazine* published:⁶

OFFICIALLY OFFICIAL

Now I can officially
take wun deep breath

and exhale into da air
dats all around me—

Thanks foa letting me know.

Day to day
da language referred to wuz understood

cause it wuz put into practice
and wuz around foa long time already.

Da new official announcement
dat wuz recently made on its behalf

is so blatantly obvious

it's just like Captain Cook
stumbling upon da islands.

Dat buggah nevah discover nutting
cause da first Hawaiians wuz already deah.

We know wat is wat
and we know wat we know.

So now dat Hawaiian Islands Pidgin
is recognized by da United States Census Bureau

it's not wun great revelation to me.

I no need any compiled data

to inform me dat lots of people in da islands
speak da language at home.

I am also one to believe
dat from ear to ear

da size of your mind is biggah
den da size of your brain

so if you going tell me
dat someting is now official

den maybe you should officially
use your intellect

and perceive as to how
it sounds so blasé to me.

But den again
it's progress

and maybe I shouldn't

jump on da guys

dat are becoming enlightened

especially wen deah are many people around
who no like Pidgin

and dey going let you know about it.

So excuse me
to all da good people

who have achieved wun new perspective.

As foa me dough

wen we now talking
about speaking da local lingo

it's like telling da sun

dat it's now official
dat it can go brighten up da day.

The next editor who offers his perspective is Michael Organ of *Tuck Magazine*, published in Canada:

We published Joe's poetry to add to the many voices around the world that are not necessarily heard as much as they should be. There is a growing trend to dilute and limit the varying voices into one safe box, effectively standardising and neutralising their identities.

It is important more than ever therefore to remind the world how rich it is in culture, ethnicity and race, with each individual voice an important working, living and breathing part for its progress.

We publish poetry from around the world and are keen again to give each a voice. The Hawaiian Pidgin is another essential

and important part of the diverse world we live in, with its beauty and individuality alongside all others.⁷



Figure 3. Joe Balaz, *Pake Burger*, 2015.⁸ Digital photomontage and mixed media. Courtesy of the artist

The following poem appeared in *Tuck Magazine*.⁹

UNBELIEVABLE

Like any adah wise guy
yapping off da top of his head

he works hard at knowing nutting.

Seeing his subject mattah on da internet
he takes it as gospel

wen it could easily be fake news
created by fake people in da fake world.

Fact checking is wun good ting
if you just stick to da facts

cause den you going know
wat is wat.

His girlfriend no help da situation

by sending him moa suspect info
on her cellphone

dat she wen find on Facebook.

Fish stories
and high school football glories

at da neighborhood bar or barbershop

now stay replaced
by soap opera politics and religion

spreading on da worldwide web
like unstoppable wildfire.

Da Russians wen do it

helped by da Nigerians
who wuz working wit da French

while dey wuz consulting
wit da Chinese.

Dats wat dis latest report
is saying anyway

and it's as reliable
as its unnamed sources.

Now he's reading
wun breaking story

dat da Pope had illicit sex
with wun Rohingya woman

while da holy man
wuz visiting Myanmar.

It's so outrageous
dat it has to be true

cause everybody
is covering up someting.

Da newly informed dude
viewing all of dis

is whipped into wun heightened frenzy
and he's exploding into anadah rant

cause wen you work hard
at knowing nutting

you going unknowingly prove
dat even belief is unbelievable.

Many other editors who have published my work have similar views about incorporating Hawaiian Islands Pidgin into their magazines. In these next few commentaries, you can see how they contrast with each other. Editor Caleb Puckett of *Futures Trading*, an online and print magazine based in Kansas, had this to say:

I see *Futures Trading* as a home for writers from around the world who share a commitment to creating innovative or forward-facing work. Given this view, I naturally welcome alterity in many forms. This embrasure extends to nonstandard and hybrid forms of language—including pidgin. The distinctive voice and phrasing—not to mention the wit—in Balaz’s writing provide a perspective and verve that I continue to find attractive after multiple readings.¹⁰

Editor Jonathan Penton of *Unlikely Stories Mark V*, which is based in New Orleans, Louisiana, said:

At *Unlikely Stories*, we seek to publish poetry that challenges and expands the readers’ worldviews. Various English-associated Paa-Twa have always been a part of that. Of course[,] we seek poetry that demonstrates insight and craftsmanship as well, and Joe Balaz’s poetry has both.

We frequently publish plain-language poetry, as we find that plain-language and elevated-language poetry can serve the same purpose: to expand the horizons of language, as well as the mindset of the reader. Plain-language poetry allows for unexpected and unfamiliar slang, which we find a wonderful component for intellectual growth. Joe Balaz’s plain-language pidgin poems fit very nicely into other poems of regionalisms and slang.¹¹

The last editor who shared his views is Alan Catlin, the editor and publisher of *Misfit Magazine*, which is based in Schenectady, New York. I had a very interesting interchange with him. When I initially sent my Pidgin poetry to his magazine, he didn’t know what to make of it. He recognized value in the work, but could not wrap his mind around publishing the poems. He couldn’t get my “method or poet’s aesthetic,” as he said.¹²

However, his inquisitive and longer response was so heartfelt and genuine, that I wrote back to him and suggested that he should try to Google my other work, and Hawaiian Islands Pidgin in general, with the notion that his research would answer some of the questions he was struggling with. He told me that when he could find the time, he would look into it.

Some months later, he wrote back to me, beginning his email with, "I bet you never thought you would hear from me again."¹³ Long story short, he had a new perspective, and he eventually published several of my Pidgin poems in *Misfit Magazine*.¹⁴ This is one of them:

NO INSULT MY ANTENNAS

No insult my antennas
wit dat hypothetical could have been

as if it wuz wun whole different story
dat you can simply create.

Da way you see it

if it looks like wun coconut
smells like wun coconut
and tastes like wun coconut

den it could have been wun lychee.

Dat sounds like editing
and ovahlap to me

and I can do da same ting
just like you.

It could have been
wun donkey jumping ovah da moon.

It could have been
3 chickens instead of 3 pigs.

It could have been
wun lethal kumquat

instead of wun poison apple too.

It could have been lottah tings
but it wuzn't.

It simply wuz wat it wuz
and dats da way it is.

If you like speculate
on how tings could have been

den go make some new fairy tales
or nursery rhymes

and let your theories
drift off into la-la land.

None of your changing scenarios
or reinterpretations

going get any reception from me.

I no moa time
foa your altering agenda—

I got wun appointment wit da real.

Alan Catlin later said about Hawaiian Islands Pidgin:

I was intrigued by the unique use of language in Joe's poetry. It is at once familiar and completely foreign. I did not know how to respond at first. I followed some of Joe's suggestions and read examples of his work that had previously been published in

various magazines. I also found a long essay about Hawaiian pidgin. This put his writing into a broader context and I was ready to reconsider his work.

I was also able to obtain a recording of Joe's poetry and was struck by the humor, the energy, and the striking originality of the work. The spoken versions are particularly vivid and give a broader understanding for an appreciation of the written work. Oral poetry has always fascinated me: how language is changed as it is spoken, how the spoken language is always richer and more in touch with the evolution of the language than the written language. I felt that experiencing Hawaiian island pidgin has enriched my understanding of both poetry, what it does, and can be, and language itself.

My magazine is called *Misfit*. I like to think and sincerely hope to be eclectic in my use of different approaches to poetry. I admit to a bias for narrative poetry but I am open to all forms of expression as long as they are thoughtful and respectful to others. Much of what I see can be classified as being traditional in approach to subject matter so it is particularly refreshing to find a writer who opens new areas (for me). There may not be anyone else who we have published who is even remotely similar to Joe's work so I guess you can say even *Misfit Magazine* has a subcategory for a true misfit and a different kind of poetry.¹⁵

All of these editors were very gracious with their comments. Their opinions on the craftsmanship of my work were flattering to me personally, but the more important thing is that it didn't matter to them that the poems were written in Pidgin. They were recognizing and appreciating the uniqueness of an artistic and literary genre to which they were being introduced. I'm thankful for these broad-minded editors who took it upon themselves to provide an avenue for poems written in Hawaiian Islands Pidgin to be shared nationally and internationally.

My poem, "Da History Of Pigeon" (and "Pidgin" in this case is spelled p-i-g-e-o-n), was inspired by the Colloquium on Pidgins and Creoles held at Honolulu's East-West Center in August of 1986. As one of the invited speakers, I wanted to present something new alongside some of my earlier works in Pidgin. I composed this poem about a week before the conference. In the audience was a person named Suzanne Romaine, who was from the United Kingdom. She got in touch with me later and asked me for permission to publish the poem in a book that she was working on. The book is called *Pidgin and Creole Languages*, and it was published in the U.K. in 1988.¹⁶ I find it interesting that this Pidgin English poem was first published where the English language originated.

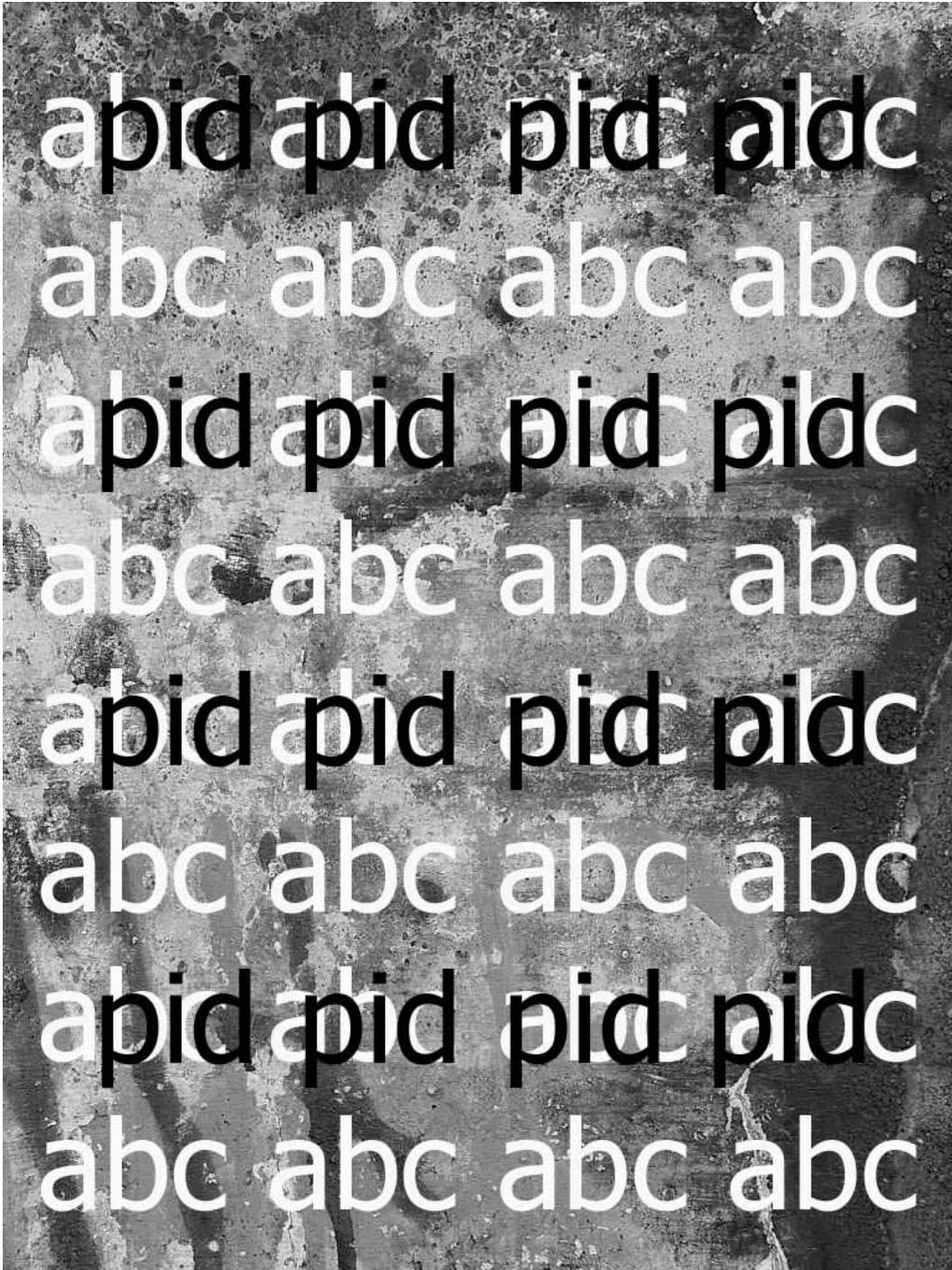


Figure 4. Joe Balaz, *Pidgin Concrete*, 2009.¹⁷ Digital photomontage. Courtesy of the artist

DA HISTORY OF PIGEON

Like different kine words
da world wuz full of different kine birds.

Yellow birds, blue birds, red birds, lovebirds,
and den came da pigeon.

Da history of da word pigeon is li'dis—

Wen da French speaking Normans
wen conquer England in da year 1066

dey wen bring along wit dem da word pigeon
foa da type of bird it wuz.

Da resident Anglo-Saxons used da word dove
or d-u-f-e, as dey used to spell 'um,
to mean da same bird.

It just so happened dat terms in Norman-French
wen blend wit Old English sentence structure
to form wat we now know as Middle English.

In da process da French word
became da one dat referred to da pigeon as food.

Today in England if you look foa dem
you can still find recipes foa pigeon pie.

Food foa taught, aah?
Even back den da word pigeon
wen blend wit pigeon foa get some moa pigeon.

So nowadays get pigeon by da zoo
get pigeon on da beach

get pigeon in town
get pigeon in coups

and no mattah wat anybody try do

dey kannot get rid of pigeon.

I guess wit such wun wide blue sky
everyting deserves to fly.

I appreciate the opportunity to share some Hawaiian Islands Pidgin writing and art, along with the insightful commentaries of some very innovative contemporary editors, with the readers of *Pacific Arts*. I encourage all writers and artists working in HIP to expand their visions and contribute their creative work regionally, nationally, and internationally. Their efforts will continue to take a once marginalized language, and its literature and art, into a broader global perspective and appreciation. I end with an image and poem that offer a Pidgin reflection on environmental change.¹⁸



Figure 5. Joe Balaz, *Solastalgia*, 2022. Digital photomontage and mixed media. Courtesy of the artist

SOLASTALGIA

Lots of people
experiencing solastalgia

dazed and diffused
and reeling to da new neologism.

Dats wat you expect to feel
wit da growing anxiety.

Climate change going rearrange
all da migratory ducks in wun row

dat not going be able
to find da mudflats anymoa.

Destination wetlands
dat used to be undah watah

going evaporate into sun baked cracks
wen everyting dry up.

At da same time out in da ocean
da dying coral stay coming all white

and dats really not alright

foa all da creatures
living on da reef.

Meanwhile
da polar bears up north

going be swimming
in moa open watah

just to find places foa hunt.

In da adah hemisphere
as da Amazon jungle disappears

and Pinocchio's nose
grows longah den his ears

all da authoritative denials
going go up in smoke

to help feed da coming hurricanes.

Existential distress
caused by wun altered environment

going be wun avalanche on da brain.

Who knows wat kine medication
dey going prescribe next

foa dis latest mental disorder?

In da least
color da pills green or blue

in pristine memory
of da trees, ocean, and sky.

Joe Balaz, born and raised in Wahiawa on the island of O'ahu, is of Hawaiian, Slovakian, and Irish ancestry. He writes in Hawaiian Islands Pidgin (HIP), a variant of English, and in American English. His writing, visual poetry, and artwork have been published in national and international journals and anthologies. Balaz is also the author of multiple books of poetry in Standard English and Pidgin, as well as the editor of Ho'omānoa: An Anthology of Contemporary Hawaiian Literature. His most recent book of poetry is Pidgin Eye (ala press, 2019). In July 2020, he received the Elliot Cades Award for Literature as an Established Writer, the most prestigious literary award given in Hawai'i. Balaz presently lives in Cleveland, Ohio. Throughout his career, he has passionately advocated for a wider and rightful acceptance of Hawaiian and Pidgin literature.

Notes

¹ Mark Young, email to author, February 20, 2018.

- ² *Figuring Out Pidgin* first appeared in *Otoliths Magazine* 49 (2018), <https://the-otolith.blogspot.com/2018/03/joe-balaz.html>.
- ³ “Bite Da Eye” first appeared in *Otoliths Magazine* 13 (April 2013), <https://the-otolith.blogspot.com/2013/04/joe-balaz.html>.
- ⁴ “Da kine” is a unique Pidgin word that can refer to a person, place, or thing. *Meditative Da Kine* first appeared in *Otoliths Magazine* 39 (2015), <https://the-otolith.blogspot.com/2015/10/joe-balaz.html>.
- ⁵ Jack Little, email to author, April 17, 2018.
- ⁶ “Officially Official” first appeared in *The Ofi Press Magazine* 57 (March 2018), 13-14, <https://en.calameo.com/read/004739059900b9643b43d>.
- ⁷ Michael Organ, email to author, March 21, 2018.
- ⁸ In the Hawaiian language and its use in Pidgin, “Pake” translates as “Chinese.” The Andrews Hawaiian dictionary provides this definition for “kaukau”: “[k]aukau is said to be a corruption of a Chinese word, and signifies to eat, to drink. It is used by foreigners in conversing with natives, and by natives conversing with foreigners.” Lorrin Andrews, *A Dictionary of the Hawaiian Language* (Waipahu, HI: Island Heritage Publishing, 2003 [1865]), 233. *PAKE BURGER* first appeared in *Otoliths Magazine* 39 (2015), <https://the-otolith.blogspot.com/2015/10/joe-balaz.html>.
- ⁹ “Unbelievable” first appeared in *Tuck Magazine*, May 2, 2018, <http://tuckmagazine.com/2018/05/02/poetry-1454/>.
- ¹⁰ Caleb Puckett, email to author, March 4, 2018.
- ¹¹ Jonathan Penton, email to author, February 27, 2018.
- ¹² Alan Catlin, email to author, April 13, 2017.
- ¹³ Alan Catlin, email to author, July 6, 2017.
- ¹⁴ “No Insult My Antennas” first appeared in *Misfit Magazine* 23 (Spring 2018), <http://misfitmagazine.net/archive/No-23/balaz.html>. Catlin published “No Insult My Antennas” after publishing other poems of mine a year earlier.
- ¹⁵ Alan Catlin, email to author, March 10, 2018.
- ¹⁶ Suzanne Romaine, *Pidgin and Creole Languages* (London: Longman, 1988), 110–3.
- ¹⁷ *Pidgin Concrete* first appeared in *Otoliths Magazine* 13 (2009), <https://the-otolith.blogspot.com/2009/03/joe-balaz-nonentity-compute-this-pidgin.html>.
- ¹⁸ *Solastalgia* first appeared in *Juked*, February 2020, <http://www.juked.com/archive/index.asp?mo=2&yr=2020&sb=d>.