

WDT: Narissa P. Spies

I have been directly involved in scientific research and academia for the better part of a decade, and how that system operates in Hawaii. While dynamic, the makeup of these institutions is predominantly comprised of individuals that do not have a connection to the local culture. The responsibility of learning about cultural connection falls upon the individual, and while many embrace the unique traditions of Hawaii, there are those that remain within the confines of their own cultures. Science itself has its own culture. As scientists are trained to be objective, and to remove cultural biases that can affect the outcome of our experiments. The longer I practice science, the more I realize that it is not possible to remove all objectivity from our studies. Our inherent culture and biases will affect how we view a system, and even how we ask the questions that we seek to answer. Years of academic training to become a scientist has led to pride and even arrogance in many academic fields. It is quite prevalent in science, and I have had to reconcile my own scientific principles with my Native Hawaiian culture. I cannot separate the two because they are both a part of who I am as a person. I often feel that I walk a fine line between my culture and science, but there is overlap between the two. I do not think of myself as being better than another group because of their beliefs. Unfortunately, that is not the norm in the culture of science, and in my opinion it has contributed to the disconnect between cultures surrounding the TMT.

I've written my reasons for declining the TMT THINK scholarship money in the Civil Beat article. Afterward what I dealt with was a huge amount of backlash from certain groups of the scientific community. I've lost friends over this. They don't have the same cultural connection that I have to the environment, so I was accused of being anti-science when that could not be further from the truth. There were weeks when I woke up dreading what I would find in my inbox, or who I would run in to in public that would say something negative towards me. It affected me emotionally, and I felt hurt by both sides of my community. There were scientists condemning me for standing up for what amounted to religious superstition in their eyes, as well as members of the Native Hawaiian community that just saw me as a scientist, and demonized all fields of science.

The TMT highlighted publicly that there is a divide between the different cultures in Hawaii. I'm the former vice president, and current president of the 'Ilima SACNAS chapter at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa. We are part of a national SACNAS (Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science) organization that is made up of minorities in science. Our chapter goal has been to bridge that divide between the culture and science, and that starts by being open about the type of work we do, and engaging the community in our science. I feel as though this has been something that has been lacking in the astronomy community. Their efforts, though appreciated in an educational sense, feel disingenuous and obligatory. It's as though they are fulfilling some kind of task in order to get something that they want. This certainly isn't the case for all those involved in astronomy in Hawaii. However, the perception among Native Hawaiian groups is that it's an attempt to appease the locals so that scientists can continue to do as they please on Mauna Kea. Even those within the SACNAS community who support astronomy are bothered by the current culture in their field.