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Radical Belonging: School as Communion of Peoples, Place, & Power

A Dissertation Study by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

May 2022

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March 2022

Radical Belonging: School as Communion of Peoples, Place, & Power

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Thank you to Suzi for being my academic mother, for opening doors, paving the way, for loving me as I am, for helping me transmute paralysis into purpose, always reminding me of the service we have to this world.

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This is for my mother and her ancestors—may you receive the healing that my heart is cultivating and intending for this whole earth, because you too are a part of her and a part of me, a person too, seeking belonging.

This is for my sisters, hybrid mix, born on diasporic trails, seeking roots, not yet landing, seed-wings so light, this is so we remember to see how much we see when wind carries us or soil buries us or water changes us, so we remember that in all our forms we are still everything and everything is us.

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This is for our children, Kamali Mahina Liu and Xolani Ke'Obi Hardy, little shoots from so many roots growing right through each other, deep under the soil. This is so your stories are not so complicated or hard to tell, for I've heard the earth sings rhizomatic stories from many pieces of land. Of those who made their way back to belonging with one another, no matter how crisscrossed their roots grew to get to sunlight, rocks and caked-pressed crust giving space for green to grow, to adorn the earth, to make that place vibrant, and to learn and tell what that all means.

ABSTRACT

Radical Belonging: School as Communion of Peoples, Place, and Power

by Joey Yung-Jun Liu

In wondering “*How are decolonizing, place/land-based, and community-grown learning places created and sustained as alternatives to dominant settler-colonial systems, and what stories would they share about their creation and existence?*”, I formed relationships with two alternative, autonomous, decolonizing schools through a teacher-guide at each school who served as guides for me to enter their spaces with invitation. In developing these relationships over 2-3 years and spending 2-3 weeks alongside each of them at their school sites, I was able to sustain natural and deep conversation with my teacher-guides, who then served as co-storyers of this research to collectively consider research questions through the lens of their stories and lived realities in their schools. This study was carried out through narrative storywork, Indigenous and culturally responsive methodologies, and critical autoethnography, as my experience of entering these school communities and forming these relationships over time became a supporting contribution to the data. Data is regarded as all the stories, conversations, reflections, observations, intuited moments, and elements of portraiture that were gathered through this process of sustained relationship with my co-storyers and my dedicated time in being within and experiencing each school space. I identified four major themes as emergent from the data: (1) a necessary process, (2) school as communion, (3) a radical existence, and (4) belonging. Dialogue with my co-storyers about the emergent themes suggests that this work of creating decolonizing, community-grown, place-specific alternatives to settler-state educational systems is necessary across many communities; yet,

entering this work requires a necessary process of individual and collective work to align to place-appropriate, decolonized, and Indigenous principals of place, community, culture, and work. Data also suggests that creating such schools is radical yet sustainable and that these schools embody a paradigmatic shift from colonizing, individualistic systems toward collective, communal systems aligned with Indigenous and anti-colonial communities. Furthermore, the data and dialogue suggest that within this work of growing such place-specific communal schools, members of the community are often afforded a greater sense of belonging and collective ownership over their educational experience. Both schools in the study also demonstrated a positive impact on the place and land on which their school was situated. Therefore, this study implicates that there is value in seeking and growing schools outside of the dominant system and that communities who seek to grow such place and person-specific schools can experience great benefit for both human and more-than-human members of the community.

Keywords: alternative-autonomous school, communal school, school as communion, decolonizing, anti-colonial, Indigenous-aligned, Indigenous methodology, decolonizing communities, portraiture, critical autoethnography, co-storying research, narrative storywork, belonging, culturally responsive methodologies, place-based, land-based, resisting settler-state, sustainable systems thinking, Hālau Kū Māna, Angeles Workshop School, revolutionary schools, diverse communities, students of color

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT.....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiv
PROLOGUE	1
Chapter 1– Emerging.....	3
Background: Situating the Research.....	3
Research Questions: Purposeful Curiosity	7
Overview of Study: What Emerged.....	8
Key Concepts: Common Language	10
Overview	22
Chapter 2– Theory: Listening & Considering	24
Critical Pedagogy	25
Indigenous Paradigm.....	35
Anti/de/colonizing Theories	44
Theories of Connection: Sustainable Systems & Place	54
Sustainable Systems Thinking	55
Theories of Place/Space/Land	64
Theory Coming Together & Possible Limitations	72
Chapter 3– Literature Review:	74
Emerging Communal Learning Places of Radical Belonging.....	74
Engaging with Literature: Purpose, Methods, & Limits	75

The Problem with Schools & The Context of Coloniality.....	76
What's in a name? Giving Colonized Meaning to "School"	78
Indigenous & Racialized-colonized "Other"	79
The Problem with Schools & the Land.....	82
The Need for Authentic Learning Places	84
Place & Learning	88
Current Alternatives & The Problem of White Spaces.....	89
Learning as Self-determination: Indigenous Conceptions of Education.....	96
Learning & the Land: The Role of Education in the Climate Crisis.....	99
Education Emerging from Community & Place: Authenticity, Indigeneity, & Land.....	102
Summary.....	107
 Chapter 4– Methodology: Guides for the Way	 109
The Problem with Traditional Research.....	110
Research as Communion: A Collective Paradigm	111
Research Questions	113
Research Methodologies	114
Decolonizing, Indigenous, and Culturally Relevant Methodologies: Instructor & Lesson.....	114
Narrative Storywork, Portraiture, & Autoethnography: Instrument & Medium.....	121
Narrative & Storywork	121
Portraiture.....	123
Critical Autoethnography.....	127
Ethics, Trustworthiness, & Authenticity	129
Relationships	129
Reciprocity	130
Ethical Considerations	131
Trustworthiness.....	133

Summary.....	136
Portrait I– To Whom the Story Belongs	137
Portraits of the Storytellers.....	137
Storying My Positionality	138
Home?	139
Coming to Decolonizing Waters.....	140
Problem Posing Dialogically from My Classroom	144
Becoming Connected	145
Meeting Ndindi	145
Meeting Trevor	147
Biographies.....	150
Ndindi	151
Trevor.....	155
Story as Relationship: Weaving Together Understanding & Journey	160
Chapter 5– Research Steps: Walking Together	161
Conceptions: Co- Imagining Meaningful & Reciprocal Inquiry.....	161
Waiting: A Pandemic Year, Meaningful Pause, & Practice of Slowing Down	162
Invitation & Consent: An Unfinished Work.....	168
Walking Together: Generating, Sharing, & Collecting Data.....	173
Engaging with Data: Listening & Considering.....	176
Analysis as Communion: Conversation, Reflection, and Coming Together	178
Storying the Findings: Channeling Learnings as Art & Science.....	180
Summary.....	181
Portrait II– Where the Story Takes Place	183
Portraits of Place.....	183

Hālau Kū Māna	184
Angeles Workshop School	190
How Story is Grounded in Place	194
Chapter 6– A Necessary Journey	195
A Necessary Journey.....	197
By Invitation Only	199
“What did the community ask for?”	205
Much Time.....	208
In Reciprocity & For the Common Good.....	212
To Grapple Deeply Within & Other Necessary Processes.....	217
A Responsibility to Your Invitation.....	224
<i>To the Mountain with Purpose</i>	227
Summary.....	239
Chapter 7– School as Communion.....	241
Relational & Dialogical	243
Relationship with Land/Place.....	243
Indigeneity	247
Pedagogy of Land & Place	248
Relationships with Self & Others	256
Real Respectful Relationships	257
School as Family.....	261
Relationships with Knowledge	263
Culturally and Communally Constructed	263
Collective Consciousness	268
Communal Learning.....	270
Of Communities	271

Hawaiian Charter Community	271
Indigenous Education Community	272
Small School Community.....	274
Academic Community.....	274
Intergenerational	275
Graduates & Former Students.....	278
Cultural Memory Making.....	282
Contextual & Personal.....	286
Humanizing.....	290
Belonging	291
Safe Space	294
Transformative	299
Apprenticeship as Decolonization.....	300
Towards Justice	302
Stabilizing & Sustainable	306
Barriers & Limits.....	309
Summary.....	315
 Chapter 8– A Radical Existence.....	 316
Resisting Historically Oppressive Systems– Rejecting Colonial Impositions	317
Indigeneity	318
Race	319
Gender & Sexuality	322
Socio-Economic Class	324
Land	326
Reimagining What Has Not Worked for Us– Dismantling & Building	327
Reimagining School Structure	328

Reimagining Curriculum & Teaching Practices	332
Reimagining Resources	337
Centering Power– Existing Beyond Colonial Conceptions & Structures of Power.....	341
Power in Place, Identity, & Indigeneity.....	342
Power as Communion	348
Power as Spirit	351
Summary.....	359
 Chapter 9 – Belonging	 362
Seeking Belonging.....	362
Finding Yourself in a Place & Creating Places of Belonging	366
Kinship	370
Kipuka	372
Devotion– A Place to Stay, A Place to Serve.....	376
Chapter 10– Sustaining	380
What We Learned Along the Way– A Summary of Findings	382
A Necessary Journey.....	383
School as Communion.....	383
A Radical Existence.....	385
Belonging	386
Limitations & Reflections.....	387
Engaging the Audience & Possible Contributions to the Field	394
The Path Ahead & To Those Who Are Coming Next	397
Beyond the Research: A Responsibility of Belonging	400
 REFERENCES	 404

LIST OF FIGURES

	<u>Page</u>
Figure 1- Liu Family Old House	139
Figure 2- Stream that runs parallel to the school, site of annual stream clean-up	187
Figure 3- Trevor's classroom with the school garden in front	187
Figure 4- Trevor and students gathered in oli circle by lunch tables under the Ulu tree	188
Figure 5- Trevor picking coconut from a tree he planted as a sapling, 15 years ago	188
Figure 6- Trevor's classroom, my children playing with Trevor's children's toys	189
Figure 7- Campus nursery, cared for by Trevor and his students	189
Figure 8- Angeles Workshop School, street view	191
Figure 9- Scott's Star Wars collection, shelves of art and RPG supplies, and bookshelves of radical literature	191
Figure 10- School built sidewalk garden and giving shelf for unhoused neighbors	192
Figure 11- Cutting Hakka Mochi with students in my visit as an expert enthusiast	192
Figure 12- Local church which collaborates with AWS in community outreach	193
Figure 13- Students working in Life Skills class on cutting skills with teacher Tiffany..	193

PROLOGUE

I struggled for two years in this program to land on a topic for my dissertation study. I was not one who enrolled knowing what I was going to do. I arrived here on an invitation from my friend Paolo and an urging from my students to go learn for all of us. I came with injuries from research, guarded from “researched on”. I came weary of the process after my master’s program in which my students journeyed with me through a participatory action research on caring relationships. Weary because I am so sensitive, and this institution does not feel right to me. Weary because despite my intense urge to protect and not exploit my students, the exploitation felt heavy even in the form of dripping compliments, widened eyes, and untempered tones of voice. I am very sensitive.

Here, I found a mother in Suzi. But as a mother, she challenged me. I came timidly to her time and time again with offerings of dissertation ideas. Carefully crafted safety nets that would allow me to expose only myself, not the ones I loved. I would never again study with my students. I would not sell my family's Hakkaness for exposure to a culture-hungry institution. I don't want the stories I breathe to be caged in a museum. We need fresh air. Each safely packaged idea of mine came to Suzi where she would smile and gently dismiss it with: “It's ok, you have more time.” Meanwhile, all the veins of my life had been quietly, ever more intensely pumping energy into a new place: dreaming of learning outside school walls. Places of community, not institution. Places of freedom, not oppression. Places of inclusiveness, not division. Places of reciprocal self-organization, not opportunistic hierarchy. Places of magic and spirit and imagination, not mechanistic conditioning. Places where our feet touch the earth and connect to her, not disembodied isolation in industrialized designs. Places that grew and flowed and changed as living organisms, not as

static fixtures of a sinister system.

I came once more to Suzi, still timidly, I shared my lostness, but somehow in conversation, so also emerged my dreaming. She told me I had my dissertation topic and I believed her, even though I wasn't sure what she meant. This has been my working out of not only what she meant but what it meant to me, to my students, and to all the people who I have encountered and become connected to in the journey of this learning. This has been our conversations, in text, breath, and picture, of that sense-making. This is the world we are growing by dreaming of it.

Chapter 1–Emerging

“Walking, I will establish my presence, as one who is claiming the earth, creating a sense of belonging, a culture of place.”

-bell hooks (2009, p. 2)

Background: Situating the Research

My dissertation study circles the perimeter of the conversation around the broader questions of *“What does it look like when we do school differently? And how do we get there?”* Yet at the heart of this study is not an answer about school choice; this study centers instead on belonging, humanity, community, redemption, harmony, and figuring *this* out together. *This* refers to a collective understanding that many of us feel in the pit of our stomachs as a response to generations of trauma under colonialism and capitalism and a continued trajectory of bleak and frightening social and ecological crisis that we face as a global community. When I began this dissertation study six years ago, I did not have the collective social commentary that has now emerged from the social media platforms of Generation Z. In 2022, as I complete this dissertation, conversations about the climate crisis are less and less up for debate; there are those who acknowledge it and those who choose to turn a blind, but increasingly quiet, eye. From Indigenous Tik Tok to Black Twitter, the most historically silenced and oppressed groups under imperialism and settler-colonialism have found a wider audience to listen to their voice and testimony. #LandBack is a thing (alongside #BlackLivesMatter and #LoveIsLove). In 2022, my contribution to this conversation about figuring *this* out together gets to stand alongside the voices of so many others, within and without the academy. Collective efforts to make change

beyond dominant institutions have more ground momentum than I have ever witnessed in my short lifetime.

In this sense, I make no claims for this research to be cutting-edge or even original. I don't believe it needs to be. This research documents a necessary process for me as a community worker and educator and advocate for justice. This necessary process has been an internship, not only into research, but also into the work of growing *communal schools*. This study illustrates the relationships and conversations which grew over time among a group of three educators as co-storyers of this research. From diverse positionalities, we attempted to sustain authenticity and vulnerability in dialogue about Indigeneity, land, learning, community, belonging, and doing *this* together.

In such conversations, questions about place, culture, identity, and how we end up where we end up, can draw us into a conversation about our relationships and genealogy to place, which led us to consider who was here first and who has served these places the longest. This becomes a conversation then about Indigeneity and, if we are not Indigenous, how do we come into places and make home in them? Do we benefit from systems of privilege that were erected by violence and forceful removal of Indigenous peoples from their native lands? Were our ancestors brought against their will through enslavement from their native lands? Did we arrive by other streams of diaspora that brought our ancestors seeking safety and survival in lands they were not born on?

These conversations are complex and for those who belong to racialized-colonized

communities, such as Indigenous, Black, and other colonized communities of color, these conversations layer upon not only historical trauma but also present-day material forms of continued oppression. But it is impossible to talk about *school*—situated in place and on land and composed of people of identities which intersect with coloniality differently—authentically and responsibly without including the voices, agendas, and futures of Indigenous and racialized-colonized people. I especially seek the voices of those from communities who have been actively moving towards self-determination and liberation of their own communities and including the more-than-human aspects of their communities within the natural world, to learn something from those who have figured out— at least in part— something about how to do *this* with their own communities and in harmony with other communities who also strive for a decolonized future. For me with my co-storyers, this conversation was weighty yet hopeful, striving to be subversive and radical yet anchored by cultural traditions and honoring those who have gone before us.

In this introduction chapter, I provide a brief overview of the purpose and design of my study, of the context my study traveled out of with the questions it holds, of the theories that shape the lenses through which I examine the data which emerged from this study, of the methodologies employed throughout this research, and of the key terms that help us to collectively conceptualize this conversation. I will also offer an overview and justifications for the organization of this dissertation and presentation of findings. With this research, I invite you to listen to the testimonies of my co-storyers, to consider the dialogues we engaged in, and

to bring your story to the conversation. Together, we hope to make meaning that can transform education for each of our communities and contribute to sustainable change for our entire planet.

This research contributes to the broader body of literature on alternative education (i.e., Haworth & Elmore, 2017; Mercogliano, 2016; Miller, 1991), and specifically highlights Indigenous, racialized-colonized, and non-dominant experience and expertise (Berryman, SooHoo, & Nevin, 2013; Smith, 2012). My work builds on a foundation of scholarly work on decolonizing and place-based pedagogy and methodology (i.e., Bell, 2013; Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2013; Gruenwald, 2008; McCoy, Tuck, & McKenzie, 2016; Milne, 2006; Root, 2010) and provides an example of conversation and participation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (including the researcher) around the ideas of anti-colonial community schooling and education. It provides insights to the kinds of spaces that could be useful for communities in their anti-colonial and decolonizing endeavors and to the social relations that can be fostered by communities within these spaces. The information brought forth in this research has the potential to inform community efforts in resisting settler-colonial school systems and creating culturally and organizationally autonomous places of learning.

Critical Pedagogy (i.e., Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Macedo, 1999; McLaren, 2015) and Anti/de/colonizing Theories (i.e. Dei, 2014; Fanon, 1963; Grande, 2015; Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012) within a paradigm centered on Indigenous ontologies are the theories which brought me to these research questions and which inform the problems that I am tackling in

this study, such as the need for schools that are autonomous and authentic to their communities. As such these theories will provide a justification for the construction of this research and guide my steps as a researcher. Additionally, theories of connection focused on sustainable systems and place (i.e., Capra & Luisi, 2018; Davis et al, 2015; Greenwood, 2008; Meadows, 2008; Meyer, 2008), in alignment with Indigenous ontologies, further inform my lens of analysis, especially shaping emergent stories about land, interconnection, and spirituality. This study relies on Indigenous and Decolonizing Methodologies (Chilisa, 2020; Kovach, 2009; Patel, 2016; Windchief & San Pedro, 2019) along with Culturally Responsive Methodology as an ethical framework to research design (Berryman, SooHoo, & Nevin, 2013). The analysis and presentation of findings in this dissertation draws on methods of narrative storywork (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Windchief & San Pedro, 2019), portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997), and critical autoethnography. I selected methodologies which centered co-storyer voice and knowledge and sought reciprocity in all decisions made throughout the research process. From this methodological approach, co-storyers were central to the determination of methods for data collection and analysis, ways of sharing data, and the intended audience.

Research Questions: Purposeful Curiosity

This study is a culturally responsive ethnographic narrative employing portraiture and critical autoethnographic methodologies. In this work, I aim to better understand: *“How are decolonizing, place/land-based, and community-grown learning places created and sustained, and what*

stories would they share about their creation and existence?” Additional research questions include: What theories guide learning and teaching? What epistemologies are embedded in their curriculum and organization? In what ways do these schools benefit their communities, both human and “more-than-human” (i.e., land and nature)? Furthermore, how do these school communities remain sustainable and authentic to their visions within the context of dominant settler-state systems?

Overview of Study: What Emerged

In this research, I explored two community-grown schools, referred to in this study as *communal schools*, characterized by diverse ways to be independent from the dominant settler-state systems and be authentically in service to their communities of people and place. These *communal schools* have achieved various levels of autonomy from socio-political structures, including, freedom to choose anti-colonial and place-specific pedagogy; to organize learning in ways that is centered on relationality, care, and reciprocity; and to engage in place and community, caring for the land as a part of their community. The existence of these *communal schools* has allowed their communities the opportunity to remove their children from dominant schools and be educated in these spaces instead, negating the dependence on colonial structures (Illich, 2000). It was important to me to include sites of both Indigenous and diverse communities including Indigenous, Black, POC and white children, in varied locales. The diversity of sites allows for a richer discussion about the possibilities in community-grown, settler-state resistant education, through which communities have multiple entry points to make meaning of our findings in a way that is useful for their own places, cultures, and towards

a deeper understanding of the decolonizing agenda.

Due to the COVID pandemic, which halted data collection in 2020 and catalyzed a major shift in the research design, I had to limit my research to the voices of one key informant at each site. In relationships which have spanned three to five years, Trevor and Ndindi became not only my guides into the communities of each of their schools but also as co-storyers of this research study. I relied on ethnographic narrative methodologies for the collection of the testimonies and stories from Trevor and Ndindi (along with a limited number of community members in their schools). I also include autoethnographic narrative and analysis as I position myself as an educator-researcher within the study, interning myself with the other co-storyers in preparation to do similar work in community-grown autonomous schools. I relied on methods of portraiture in the analysis and presentation of findings as a means to lean into the aesthetic qualities of storytelling, foregrounding the rich experiences and oral histories of the co-storyers of this study.

Through conversation, community members of each participating communal schools narrated how their school was created and sustained, how their school functions, and how it benefits their community. Teachers, students, community members and I engaged in dialogue, which recognizes the non-western “we” as epistemologically valid within colonized social spaces. Our dialogue aimed to understand these communal schools within the context of settler-colonial systems, the challenges faced by these schools in remaining sustainable and authentic, and the potential these spaces have in liberating colonized communities and settler-

occupied spaces.

This understanding emerged from participating in relational learning together in person for a 2–4-week period and the gathering of oral histories over a period that spanned 7-8 months. Guided by the research questions and Indigenous Methods (because my co-storyers are members of Indigenous communities) and Culturally Responsive Methods (which helps guide me as an outsider to those communities), co-storyers and I collected data collaboratively, drawing on participants' keen experience and non-western knowledges in an authentic exploration through conversation about their personal history and the stories of each communal school. I also engaged in participant-observation and employed ethnographic data collection tools to narrate my experience of learning within these spaces.

Key Concepts: Common Language

Below, I will briefly discuss key concepts that shaped my study, including theoretical constructs and methodological approaches. While these concepts will be expanded in detail in further chapters, I find it useful to establish some working definitions and common understandings of these ideas, especially when the scholarship around some of these terms is new or debated. In naming my understandings of each and calling on the scholars who have shaped my understandings, I offer a dialogical entry point between myself and my audience to build a space that is conducive for collaborative sense-making (Anderson & Herr, 1999).

Indigenous Tuck and Yang (2012) write, “Indigenous peoples are those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how we/they came to be in a particular

place -indeed how we/they came to be a place” (p. 6). Being Indigenous is entangled with belonging, especially belonging to land. Furthermore, Tuck and Yang write to distinguish the difference between ancestry and tribal membership: “Indigenous identity and tribal membership are questions that Indigenous communities alone have the right to struggle over and define, not DNA tests, heritage websites, and certainly not the settler state.” This is not to say that only those who have tribal membership are Indigenous, especially in geo-political contexts that are not as linked to settler colonialism and where Indigeneity may be understood differently, however, it is important to draw caution to the generalization of having native blood as access to the experience of Indigeneity. This has been one of many observed settler moves to innocence (Tuck & Yang, 2012) that must be resisted in research.

This study brought me into different communities of Indigenous people. It brought me into diverse communities with many or few Indigenous people. This study is an exercise in foregrounding Indigeneity while relationally positioning oneself in learning with Indigenous communities. It is an exercise in grappling with issues that intersect with Indigenous rights, land and sovereignty and education, within different contexts. It is an exercise in having conversation about these issues that intersect with Indigenous rights and Indigenous futures, and to do so with Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people, still walking in awareness of colonial structures and positionality. It is a listening for the voices to emerge from within Indigenous and other

racialized-colonized communities as they come together and as they determine for themselves. It is a practice of not allowing decolonization to be a performance or metaphor but to ground it in the realities of *who* colonization was constructed *against*. Beginning with and centering on Indigeneity is not an attempt to exclude or silence the voices of other racialized-colonized communities (and I am especially sensitive to the unique histories carried by Black folks descended from a diaspora of colonial enslavement); rather, it is a way to align our understandings of colonialism in people and in place and to bear witness to the material effects colonialism continues to have on communities today, as we position ourselves with our identities within and against the structures of colonial and capital hegemony. I ground myself within my own identity to intentionally voice my learning as a non-Native researcher, working by invitation only with Indigenous communities, only as they see fit. This practice is intended to resist settler-colonial norms of domination and appropriation and replace those with practices of co-constructed reciprocity under Indigenous and place-derived epistemologies.

Decolonization In my theoretical framework in the next chapter, I will detail my understanding of the flow of anti/de/colonial conversation, as they have emerged from different historical moments and geo-political contexts. Theoretical discussion of anti/de/colonization necessarily varies from the application of anti/de/colonizing terminology to describe the philosophies embedded within the learning places made by my various communities of participant, as each location approaches this work from

varying entry points, varying positionality, varying contexts, varying explicitness, and varying epistemologies. It is important in establishing a working term for this paper that we understand anti-colonialism broadly to be the ideologies and actions that oppose colonial structures, including settler-colonialism and modern colonizing institutions (including places no longer under a colonial government) which continue to perpetuate white hegemony and the stripping away of Indigenous culture, language, and knowledge.

Decolonization in broad terms are the actions that bring us individually and collectively out of a colonized existence with colonial ideologies and further establishes a way of life centered on Indigenous and collective cultures, epistemologies, and social organization. Decolonization as an agenda must be centered around an Indigenous future, as Tuck and Yang (2012) remind us, to not become a white co-opted metaphor. Decolonizing work is grounded in Indigenous principles of reciprocity and collectivism and is defined and negotiated contextually within each community. Anti/de/colonizing work also takes into account the global scale of colonization and attends to the common interests and agendas of Indigenous and colonized peoples as a whole.

Land/place/space Theoretically, land/place/space is also a complex conversation. For me, it is not separate from the conversation of anti/post/de/colonizing theories. Within the literature, there are tensions and contradictions that I will explore in my theoretical framework. However, as a part of my research design and in identifying participants,

land/space becomes a dynamic concept that emerges out of geo-political context and identity, including connection to Indigeneity or non-Indigeneity.

For Indigenous and decolonizing scholars, all conceptions of place are rooted in Indigenous cosmologies. Kanien'kehá:ka scholar, Sandra Styres, walks us through a full conceptualization of space, place, and land. I bring her voice into this paper to help us understand each term, especially as they are understood in Indigenous and decolonizing theories:

Space: "Space is a continuous area or expanse that is free, available, or unoccupied (Styres, 2017, p. 45). Space is empty and abstract, whereas place is concrete, sensed, and grounded in lived experiences and realities. Space, in its formal context, is primary, absolute, infinite, and empty, and place-making emerges from the vastness and existence of space (Styres, 2017, p. 46). Space requires the substance of culture and stories to render it placeful" (p. 26)

Place: "By inhabiting spaces—by being present in those spaces, to occupy those spaces, to story those spaces, to (re)member and (re)cognize those spaces—they become placeful. Place refers to physical geographic space and is defined by everything that is included in that space—also referred to as landscape, ecology, and/or environment—and is denoted as land (lower case "l"). Connected but distinct, Land (capital "L") is more than physical geographic space" (p. 27).

Land: "Connected but distinct, Land (capital "L") is more than physical

geographic space. Land expresses a duality that refers not only to place as a physical geographic space but also to the underlying conceptual principles, philosophies, and ontologies of that space...Land as an Indigenous philosophical construct is both space (abstract) and place/land (concrete); it is also conceptual, experiential, relational, and embodied” (p. 27)

This study attempts to focus on the *sense* of land/place-based pedagogy in participants' contexts, even as this is experienced in process, in becoming. This may be observed in ways such as outdoor learning, education for sustainability, conceptualization of knowledge as tied to place, the embodiment of teaching within geographic and cultural difference, or the education towards sovereignty and repatriation of land for Indigenous people.

Alternative-Autonomous My study bears a shift in terminology which traces the path of my understanding and conceptualizing what I have been studying. During the research-design and literature search first half of this research process, I relied on the notion of “alternative- autonomous” to delineate a concept of school I was seeking, while being unsure of what I would find. After the data collection phase, the term “communal school” emerged as a more authentic term to name the schools who participated in my study.

The notion of “alternative” is a dialectical one; without a dominant system operating on sameness, there would be no need for anything which flags as different

from that dominant paradigm to be understood as alternative to the system it seeks to escape. So long as there are educational systems and places that exist parallel to and paradoxically to the dominant system, we will have to see them as alternatives. If the dominant system at present is the colonial one, then we can define that which is anti-colonial as the ground for alternative learning. The alternative paradigms, Dei (2013) speaks of, as a creative encounter and resistance for Indigenous and marginalized people, includes alternative ways of learning and teaching. Here is where I situate the movements behind which the sites that I am engaging with in this study have emerged.

I hyphenate “alternative” with “autonomous” to underscore the notion of separation and independence, at least attempted, from the dominant state and power structures. This is to differentiate from a large body of scholarly work that defines alternative education as offshoots of the dominant, colonial system, typically connoting a punitive environment. More recent literature on alternative education includes conceptualizations of classrooms in which democratic, project-based, and other innovative pedagogies take base. However, I have found these examples to mostly adhere to the dominant model for education or ignore the conversation completely which indicates a complicit acceptance of many parts of dominant structures for education. Thus, to emphasize the attempted departure from the colonial system, by a range of attempts to be autonomous and community-grown, I use the term “alternative-autonomous”.

Communion *Communion* is defined by Oxford English Dictionary (2022) as: “the sharing or exchanging of intimate thoughts and feelings, especially when the exchange is on a mental or spiritual level”. Here we see that *communion* is relational, it is a sharing or exchange. It requires much time and understanding, as the intimate is not shared without trust and knowing. It exists in the realm of the mental, emotional, and spiritual, as it is the exchange of intimate *thoughts* and *feelings*. To facilitate sharing of our emotional and spiritual selves with one another is a humanizing practice—one that allows us to be more than just our bodies’ capacity for labor. It is a creative, transcendent, and communal experience.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) quotes Che Guevara in his writing about *communion with the people* as it became more than a theory and instead an “integral part” of who they were in their daily work and relationships with the people they were organizing with in Sierra Maestra. Freire (1970) extracts from this example an understanding of *communion* to be “decisive for the transformation” and the catalyst for “revolutionary praxis to become definitive” (p. 151). Freire (1970) also posits that *communion with the people* is made possible by “humility and the capacity to love” (p. 151).

Bell hooks (2002) weaves this notion of communion in several of her writings on love, community, and becoming one’s authentic self. She draws her definition from Susan Griffin who in *The Eros of Everyday Life* wrote:

“The wish for communion exists in the body. It is not for strategic reasons alone

that gathering together has been at the heart of every movement for social change...These meetings were in themselves the realizations of a desire that is at the core of human imaginings, the desire to locate ourselves in community, to make our survival a shared effort, to experience a palpable reverence in our connections with each other and the earth that sustains us” (Griffin, 2015)

Hooks (2002) poses that it is through communion that we love ourselves and one another, that we heal from the sickness of division imposed on us by oppressive structures, and that we refuse to participate in patriarchal thinking, and to be aware of ecological and social needs which require our solidarity and coming together.

Communion is also the only thing that can sustain us as we resist our conditions and invent a new world to exist as our liberated authentic selves (hooks, 2003).

This idea of *communion* as a revolutionary, humanizing endeavor in education and community self-determination is touched on by Darder (2017) who, drawing from the writings of Freire, speaks of an “evolution of class consciousness with an explicit aim toward the establishment of a more harmonious and peaceful world” (p.3). Darder claims, “In this evolution of class consciousness, the communal spiritual dimension cannot be negated or ignored, given its constitutive potential to initiate and sustain committed revolutionary action” (p.3). *Communion* as a term in this study will encompass these nuanced and layered notions of exchange, sharing, togetherness, love, healing, in-touchness, connection, communication, and collective existence in intentionality.

Communal School Defining *communion* in this way, with a nuanced connotation of spirituality and consciousness, relationship and exchange, the communal and the revolutionary, I bring together my findings drawn from Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School and the stories of the people who create and experience them. I present a portrait on the *possibility of school to exist as a form of communion*. I refer to the schools I have learned from in this study as examples of *communal schools*, drawing from our general understanding of *communal* as pertaining to *being of the community* and connoting an experience of *communion* as I have defined above. My hope is for my reader to bring their own experiences and imaginations to the conversation, as we collectively replace oppressive versions of *school* with a reimagining of what authentic school is and can be in the dimensions of our most humanizing collective consciousness. Thus, presenting these findings is an attempt to increase collective refusal, (Grande, 2015) of the colonial-oppressive versions of school that do not serve us and to strengthen the collective knowledge of possibility towards actualizing the versions of school our communities need and deserve.

Community In this inquiry, I look at schools “grown from their communities”. This notion is foundational to my study yet warrants first defining what *community* means. A complex, dynamic entity, community can be defined in terms that are as multi-faceted as the many ways that communities can form, grow, and evolve. Because these factors are often tied to such things as place, culture, language, and even realm, it can be

difficult to delineate succinctly and authentically what we mean by community.

However, for the purpose of this dissertation, it may be useful for me to indicate what I do *not* mean when I speak of community in this research. I do not use the term community to indicate any form of institutionally and hierarchically formed organization, as is indicated in much of the literature around “community partnerships” in higher-ed institutions or even “community schools” which are state-organized K-12 schools that contain services for the community (such as medical services or adult classes) beyond those commonly present within dominant K-12 schooling. “Community” organizations in this sense can exist without deep, sustained relationships of communion as I defined above, relying instead on hierarchical organization.

Communion, then, is at the heart of the definition of community in this study. I also acknowledge a tie to place and land for each community, comprising of people and natural entities that are connected, at least in part, by place. Other elements of connection may also be at play in bringing communities together, including culture, interest, scholarship, work, service, invitation, shared resources, and belief systems. While communities are not static and do evolve over time with members coming and going, and some communities fade away entirely over time, core to the community’s existence is a shared effort to sustain the presence of that community. I draw these notions from a systems theory explanation of natural systems which may regard any

naturally existing system as a self-organized community (Capra & Luisi, 2015).

Authentic Freire (1970) says that *authentic* thinking is concerned with reality and takes place only in communication. Here, we extract a meaning of *authentic* to be pertaining to truth, yet something can only be true if it is shared, centering authenticity in relationship and reciprocity. Smith (2012) defines *authentic* from an Indigenous lens: “One draws upon a notion of authenticity, of a time before colonization in which we were intact as Indigenous peoples” (location 691). So authentic here carries a spirit of intactness, of wholeness, of non-linear timelessness (not precluding a modern Indigeneity, and of being beyond the context of colonization). Aluli-Meyer (2008) also writes to marry “Indigenous” with “authentic”. Her description of authentic is not simple. There is not one line I can extract from her entire article to define what “authentic” means. Instead, it is a reading of loops and spirals that wanders through quantum physics, Indigenous common sense, theories of everything, yogic and Taoist ruminations, and story. And that is exactly what I mean by “authentic” too. It is that part that says listen and be still, you can’t take this, you can only experience it. It is energy and spirit. It is moving and flowing and sounding. To many western-minded people it may be voodoo or magic. It can’t be captured by the binaries of western science. It is experienced in the transpatiality of mind, body, spirit in oneness with one another which brings us into harmony with *everything* (Aluli-Meyer, 2008). My spirit is calling me into a scholarship that honors the authentic. I am not alone. I write as standing on the

shoulders of those who have gone before me such as Aluli-Meyer (2008), Capra and Luisi (2018), Dei (2002), hooks (2003) and others who speak of spirituality and authentic knowing as a way to resist colonization and disrupt the colonial academy.

Overview

This dissertation is organized in ten chapters. The first is this introduction chapter. In the second chapter, I explain and justify the theories which inform the theoretical lenses from which I have examined this research. In the third chapter, I present the landscape of existing academic literature which provided the context from which my study emerges and justifies the necessity of this research. The fourth chapter presents the methodological frameworks used to craft and guide the steps of this study. I then offer a portrait chapter to introduce the main co-storyers of this study: Ndindi and Trevor. In this chapter, I also introduce myself as an autoethnographic subject and offer a positionality statement. The fifth chapter details the actual steps taken to complete this research study, documenting the major shifts which occurred within this study as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I offer a second portrait chapter to illustrate and give photo references of the places in which this study took place. Chapters 6-9 present my findings and discussions concurrently, organized by the four major themes of emergent findings: A Necessary Journey, School as Communion, A Radical Existence, and Belonging. Finally, the tenth chapter is a conclusion to the study and offers suggestions for next steps and implications of the contributions of this study to the larger body of educational research.

The writing style of this entire dissertation embeds my positionality and reflexivity and makes intentional moves between three forms of writing: expository, analytical, and narrative (Kovach, 2009), relying on first person voice in key places to remind the reader of my presence as human instrument of research and channel of seeing and learning. This reminder of my presence is a way to decolonize from the western-research paradigm which is fraught with the fallacy of objectivity and supremacy over knowledge. It is also a reminder that as a human in process, my seeing is limited to my positionality and the lenses of my lived experiences as dictated by my intersectional identities and multiple contexts.

Throughout the presentation of this study, I hope to create a dialogical space for the reader to enter an experience with our voices and stories. I hope that through such an exercise of reflective conversation, we can further understand ourselves and our shared experiences as educators and agents of social change, edifying our personal and collective efforts to transform and sustain our communities in authenticity, health, and abundance, particularly in the work of creating and sustaining authentic, autonomous, communal schools.

Chapter 2–Theory: Listening & Considering

Theory is integral to every part of research. Heeding Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) reminder that "research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions" (Introduction, para. 6), I look to theory to guide each step I take as a researcher. The selection of theory is intentional and strategic to become a force that will reckon with the oppressive political and social conditions we hope to resist and transform. We come to theory when we need to make sense of our world and our experiences. Thus, the theories that speak to us, that help us find the answers, healing, and liberation we seek (hooks, 1994), are the theories that give academic language to the thoughts, experiences, and choices we are dynamically living in our contexts.

It is with this awareness for my research work, that I name critical pedagogy, anti/de/colonial theories, and theories of connection, systems, and place as the theoretical framework for this dissertation study. All the theories I am discussing in this chapter, with varying explicitness, will guide the user of these theories towards Indigenous and ancient knowledge, in that Indigenous and ancient knowledges inherently resist and subvert the paradigm of dominant western hegemony. Each of these lenses brings the researcher into a perspective that aligns with the ontologies of Indigenous and collective cultures yet adapts to our present environment and future goals as a community of living members. The paradigm–encompassing ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies (Guba, 1990)– of Indigenous Knowledges serves as the compass within each of the other bodies of theory which I employ.

Thus, in my presentation of critical pedagogy, anti/de/colonial theories, and theories of connection/ systems/ place, I select first Indigenous voices within those disciplines along with the texts and writers who foreground Indigeneity and Indigenous knowledge.

These theories together allow me to consider the phenomenon of *communal schools* and to see it from a perspective that considers the historicity of our experiences and socially constructed contexts, but that also pushes our seeing beyond into ontologies of non-linearity and non-western histories. I believe that this ability to transcend, but not ignore, the different scales of perspective is necessary to manifesting a decolonized reality. In this chapter, I present the ways in which these theories complement each other, while each bringing a particular facet to the lens. I also note the ways in which each theory may stretch the others beyond their inherent limits.

Critical Pedagogy

I begin with critical pedagogy not because it is foremost in my study, but because my entry point to education, research, and all other theories I employ stem from my study of critical theories. When I was still a student-teacher, my theoretical foundation was the writings of Freire, Darder, hooks, and McLaren, among other writers of critical pedagogy. My devotion to social change was fueled by the collective urging of critical pedagogues to take political action toward the emancipation of all who are oppressed. Critical theory became the tool to language and practice the stirrings I long held within that the status quo did not serve my community and that we as a group of critical and creative thinking people can come together to make social

change for ourselves. I am indebted and grateful to these teachers for calling me on this path of scholarship and sustaining me in this journey of service to education and social change.

Critical pedagogy is a philosophy framed within a critique of capitalist systems, founded on imperialism and colonization, which subjugate and enslave some groups of people through constructs of racialization, for the wealth and privilege of a few in a capitalist economic-political state-system. Peter McLaren (2015) states that “*critical theorists begin with the premise that men and women are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege.*” (p. 131) Critical pedagogy encompasses theories of politics, culture, economics (based largely on the theories of Karl Marx), in a *dialectical analysis* which, according to McLaren, sees problems of society as “a part of the *interactive context* between individual and society” (p. 131). Critical pedagogy attempts to unveil the hidden agenda of this oppressive system, to dismantle the power structures that exist to subjugate some while benefiting others, and to liberate all people—both the oppressed and the oppressor—through critical reflection, dialogue, and action. The goal of this process of critique is to arrive at a more liberated version of society.

Marx, Freire, and other critical scholars employ dialectical reasoning to see relationships between things and their “inner-actions of opposites” (Allman, 1997, p,67). That is, dialectical reasoning calls us to see arguments from various perspectives and to arrive at conclusions that acknowledge a *both/and* explanation more than an *either/or*. Thus, the tension between seemingly opposing situations calls for the attention of critical scholars to make sense

of how both or all experiences are in play. Dialectical reasoning is crucial to our understanding of our human condition as a dynamic process with complex, overlapping realities, yet still grounded in a common social context or truth. Dialectical thinking analyzes complex situations where seeming contradictions are evident. McLaren (2015) explains that “Dialectical contradictions, or the “unity of opposites”, are those phenomena that could not exist, continue to exist, or have come into existence in the absence of their internal relation to one another” (p. 135). Understanding dialectical contradictions brings us to the understanding that liberating ourselves from the contradictions imposed on us within a colonial capital system necessitates our dialectical, dialogical work of “negating the negation”, freeing ourselves from the ways in which we are subordinated into colonial conditions which perpetuate our further subordination.

Marx employs dialectical thinking to develop his complex theories of capitalism, including the explanation that people as products of labor are also able to participate in the perpetuation of capitalist systems which exploit us as labor (Allman, 1997). According to Marx, in a capitalist system, through the material control of resources and the production of labor (1848), the ruling class commodifies the working class, thus stripping them of not only their freedom but also their humanity. Claudia Von Werholf (2012) writes, “Today, everything on earth is turned into commodities, i.e., everything becomes an object of “trade” and commercialization (which truly means liquidation, the transformation of all into liquid money). In its neoliberal stage it is not enough for capitalism to globally pursue less cost-intensive and

preferably “wageless” commodity production. Capitalism relies on ongoing systems of colonization to maintain power through the material accumulation of wealth, not only in the subjugation and production of people into labor, but also in the seizure of land and resources. Thus, capitalism and colonization rely on weapons of racialization to subordinate Indigenous, Black, and other non-white people as a means to justify colonial genocide, seizure of their land and resources, and the enslavement of people, in particular Black people, as free labor to fuel systems of wealth (Monzó, 2020). Lilia Monzó (2020) explains “the link between racism and capitalism goes much further to the fundamental necessity of capitalism for expansion through colonialism, which was made acceptable through the ideological dehumanization of the colonized world.” The objective is to transform those who white colonial powers deem to be “less -than-human” and their lands and resources into commodities, a process which estranges people from their communities, their bodies, their lands, and their creative thinking.

Freire expands on Marx’s idea of estrangement– as a symptom of becoming not only means of production as labor, but capital itself– to say that our education system– built on a pedagogy of estrangement– furthers this fragmentation; our young people form their identities and consciousness separate from the natural world, and instead internalize that they are inseparable pieces of a capitalist society. In schools, we are taught to consume products of capital to live as much as we are taught to aspire to giving our life and energy to labor to produce capital (Darder 2015). Antonia Darder (2015) writes: “Moreover, the alienation provoked by this intense separation of workers and the natural world has reached such proportions that

few seem to have the where-withal to halt its movement or to challenge the colonizing impact on our lives” (p.25).

Most disturbing about the capitalist effect of commodifying humanity, then, is the individual level of participation in allowing this commodification to happen under the guise of free will election to work as a mechanistic cog in the labor machine, because of colonial programming or the suppression of consciousness (Freire, 1970). Cultural hegemony, as written about by Gramsci (1971), is the process by which the ruling class has manipulated the collective social ideology to garner the consent of the lower classes for the will and action of the ruling class. In other words, through social hegemony, the oppressed enable and even agree with the oppressors in the very actions that work to oppress the oppressed. This seems inconceivable but it is precisely this level of invisible manipulation that has made the ruling class so powerful for so long. Hill, Monzó, and Agostinone-Wilson (2015) summarize Gramsci’s analysis of hegemony as “common sense”, disguising coercion which would likely elicit resistance from the people, into an ideology that “precludes the masses from critically questioning the status quo” (p. 132), noting that “common sense” ideology is self-reinforcing and repels the critique of the paternalistic systems by feeding people a narrative that though the state is imperfect, “it is better, more humane, and more democratic than other economic systems, especially communist alternatives” (p.132). Hegemony as “common sense” is established and reinforced in schools, where students are taught a myth that the educational system is preparing them to the best of its ability to succeed in a free-market society– that the success of each person is

dependent only on their individual merit.

It is by maintaining a lack of clarity that allows colonial powers to continue having power (Freire, 1970). Because we do not hold a full awareness of our history and current reality as colonized beings, we willingly subscribe to the colonized life, even romanticizing and glorifying the products of colonial “progress” (Macedo, 1999). This hidden sinister agenda of capitalism is what writers of critical pedagogy seek to unveil and shift through education. Without realizing that the truth of “our democracy” is an ugly one, we would never have an intrinsic desire for struggle. Antonia Darder (2015) writes, “The struggle for change begins, then, at the moment when human beings become both critically aware and intolerant of the oppressive conditions in which they find themselves and push toward new ways of knowing and being in the world” (p.80), a process which Paulo Freire (1970) termed conscientization. This shift of consciousness has a dialectical relationship with action towards change—the more we struggle for change, the more we become aware of our conditions and the more we become aware of our conditions, the more we act in ways that resist and transform our conditions. Thus, critical reflection remains an integral piece of revolutionary work, or praxis as Marx, and, later, Gramsci and Freire would teach us. Darder (2015) describes Freire’s notion of conscientization as “the organic formation of an intimate relationship between consciousness, human action, and the world that we seek to reinvent. But most important, he emphasized the communal or social circumstances that are required in its formation” (p. 85) Here we can see that to become conscious, we must participate in community and in relational learning and

unlearning, to truly see oppressive systems that ensnare our societies and to work to collectively liberate ourselves from them.

Critical pedagogy emphasizes education as a dialectical social context within which colonialism, racism, capitalism, sexism, and other oppressive structures are either reinforced or a critical consciousness is awakened (Freire, 1970). Ira Shor (1992) writes that “No curriculum can be neutral. All forms of education are political because they can enable or inhibit the questioning habits of students, thus developing or disabling their critical relation to knowledge, schooling, and society” (pp. 12-13). School, then, is a political battleground where various, largely colonial and capitalist, agendas vie for domination of young people’s minds. For children of Indigenous and non-western cultures, school becomes a key place where cultural amnesia is administered, stripping away the language, practices, and beliefs that do not align with western hegemony (Macedo, 1999). Colonizing schools are spaces where docility is learned, and students are sorted to fill a racially and gender stratified capitalist market economy. Yet, critical pedagogues remind us, schools also hold the potential for radical conscientization and liberation. Peter McLaren (2015) posits that “a dialectical understanding of schooling permits us to see schools as sites of *both* domination and liberation” (p. 132). bell hooks (2003) further argues that “Whenever we love justice and stand on the side of justice, we refuse simplistic binaries. We refuse to allow either/or thinking to cloud our judgment. We embrace the logic of both/and. We acknowledge the limits of what we know” (p. 10). As such, Freire (1970) argues: “This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves

and their oppressors as well” (p. 26).

In this struggle for liberation of all humanity, Freire (1970) teaches us that the path is through dialogue, as dialogue is inherently founded on the seeing of the other as human. It is in dialogue that we collectively construct our awareness and critical reading of the world we inhabit. Freire (1970) writes that dialogue is only possible through “a profound love for the world and for people” (p. 70), through humility (p. 71), and “an intense faith in mankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human” (p.71). Freire (1970) further claims that dialogue cannot exist without hope, explaining that hope speaks to the human condition of unfinishedness which brings us back iteratively to communion with one another as we continue this transformation work collectively (p. 72). Finally, Freire (1970) posits that dialogue cannot exist without critical thinking and that critical thinking must not remain as a theoretical exercise but rather lead to action informed by reflection and aimed at transformation of oppressive structures, a process Freire calls *praxis* (p. 107). In unified praxis, oppressed peoples, then, are able to collectively liberate themselves and transform the world around them.

Dialogue in teaching, then, holds a particular potential for transformation. bell hooks (1994) writes that “To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing (p. 130). As a dialogic and transformative action, education also bears the characteristic of unfinishedness. Freire (1998) writes, “simply “to teach”

is not possible in the context of human historical unfinishedness” (p.31) This notion of constant becoming and unfinishedness in our work and life as critical educators parallels values found in Indigenous and collective cultures and underscores the never-ending necessity for humility, reflection, and communion with others. It also gives us grace to be as ones in process, still learning and growing, and modeling such growth and change within the communities we both teach and learn from.

A hallmark of the writing of many critical pedagogues is the embrace of emotion and connection as part of the human experience. Reminiscent of the writings of Erich Fromm, Freire and other critical pedagogues often write about love, hope, fear, joy, and the human need for togetherness. There seems to be an agreement among writers of critical pedagogy about the human need to be connected to the natural world, to one another, and to one’s spiritual self. Fromm (1956) writes: “The deepest need of man, then, is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness” (p.8).

Critical pedagogy shapes our research of education in reminding us to look for the oppressive, and often hidden, structures and agendas at play. Yet, in taking a critical approach, we are not limited to merely naming the dire conditions and realities we experience as colonized peoples; rather, critical pedagogy urgently reminds us to see and experience the transformative potential within all of us. As such, critical pedagogy is a pedagogy of hope. Freire (2014) tells us that “hope is an ontological need” (p.2) and that “One of the tasks of the progressive educator, through a serious, correct political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for

hope, no matter what the obstacles may be” (p. 3). Hooks (2003) also cautions us against despair as the absence of hope, because “when despair prevails, we cannot create life-sustaining communities of resistance” (p. 12). Thus, our work in research and education, as guided by a lens of critical pedagogy, is to construct hope in dialogue and dialectical understanding of our conditions, to educate ourselves and our communities towards fuller humanity and a reinvention of the world in which we may exist as our authentic, liberated selves. This is a process that requires sacrifice and struggle (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), yet which also affords immense freedom and joy. Freire (2014) reminds us of the joy of teaching and learning and reminds us that it is crucial to: “sense the joy that steeps it, that is part of it, and that is ever ready to fill the hearts of all who surrender to it.” (p.73) Education, and school or the classroom as the place in which communal learning is situated, bears a unique potential to be a space of liberation and joy. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) describes:

“The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom” (p. 208)

This study is brought forth by such a belief in the radical possibility for education to be a practice of freedom and for school to be a place of connection, transformation, joy and even love. Drawn from critical pedagogy, concepts of communion, dialogue, transformation, critical

and dialectical thinking, praxis, collective consciousness, humanization, liberation, and unfinishedness are all surfaced throughout this research.

Indigenous Paradigm

While critical theories were my first meaningful theoretical encounter in the academy, as I continued my journey, I found myself more deeply in Indigenous knowledges. In many ways, this came relationally, as I found myself in spaces and in relationships with Indigenous folks who taught me from their lived perspectives. In other ways, this was a natural progression of my own path through interrogating what is and how to be decolonizing in practice. Intuitively, in seeking knowledge outside of the colonial paradigm, genealogy of knowing leads to paradigms of Indigenous and ancient non-western cultures. As I labored to synthesize my understandings for the work I did within education, I understood that for all of us who seek to be critical of oppressive structures and to truly enact decolonizing work within education, we *must* study and align ourselves with knowledge and discourse which emerges from Indigenous scholars and the Indigenous paradigm.

As an established voice in the academy, many Indigenous scholars have gifted the wider human community with teachings, theory, and methods (i.e., Goodyear-Ka ōpua, 2013; Kovach, 2009; Windchief & San Pedro, 2019). Others write specifically to Indigenous audiences. I have tried to listen carefully as I approach each text, ascertaining if this writing and knowledge is meant for me or not. I hope I have heard the voices, intentions, and invitations accurately. I ask for forgiveness from the teachers, scholars, and communities I may have transgressed if I have

heard incorrectly, if I have wrongly assumed something is for me when it is not. I understand the decision to keep knowledge sacred, meant for some and not others. I hope my work honors this sentiment. To those who have gifted me knowledge and seeing, I am deeply indebted and grateful. I come to them seeking to be in harmony, to steward the land, and to unsettle the colonial structures which are destroying us.

Indigenous Knowledges encompass a breadth of scholarship which emerge from various groups of Indigenous writers situated in various and distinct geographic and cultural contexts. To give the name Indigenous knowledges is not to flatten distinct cultural epistemologies into a monolithic theory, rather it is to uphold the tradition that many Indigenous scholars have set forth (i.e., Dei, 2016; Smith, 2012; Grande, 2015) in constructing a collective voice of solidarity and commonality that speaks to ancient authority in Indigenous peoples as the original stewards of land and knowledge and to the shared lived experiences that Indigenous peoples undergo in self-determining their present day existences and futures in the face of a globalized colonial hegemony.

George Sefa Dei (2016) offers the following outline to conceptualize the contested and complex notion of Indigenous Knowledges:

“Key issues must center around concepts of positionality and politics, identity, language, culture, and history. We also have to respond to questions around origin, authenticity, and essentialism. Language, cultural memory, and colonization always need to be evoked in a critical investigation of what is Indigenous. Fundamentally, the

Indigenous should be perceived as mostly about place-based knowing, an understanding of traditional sacred relationships between peoples and their cultures and cosmologies. These relationships offer a holistic knowledge base to operate.” (pp. 294-295)

Dei (2016) asserts that in defining Indigenous knowledges this way is not in an attempt to homogenize or obliterate rich, multi-layered, and contextual Indigenous identities and epistemologies, but rather, that doing a collective work to define and dialogue around Indigeneity reveals a shared experience and understanding that can powerfully inform social and political movements towards self-determination.

Many Indigenous scholars offer their description of Indigenous knowledges in a way that supports this notion of solidarity and Indigenous power and authority in subverting western hegemony. Shahjan (2015) explains that Indigenous knowledges are rich, dynamic, adaptive, metaphysical, varied, and honor dreams, feelings, intuitions, and visions as ways of knowing. June George (1999) intimates that Indigenous knowledge are “knowledges produced in a specific context and employed by lay people in their everyday lives” while Mahia Maurial (1999) emphasizes the domain of Indigenous knowledge as lived out in everyday lives rather than limited to libraries or labs. This understanding of Indigenous knowledge bears the essence of accessibility and practicality for the common good of all in the community, compared to the elite wielding of knowledge in colonial practices to create hierarchies of power.

Interconnection is fundamental to the Indigenous paradigm. Kovach (2009), citing work

by Marlene Brandt-Castellano, explains that Indigenous knowledges come from a multitude of sources including: relational knowing, the physical world, the metaphysical inner space, traditional teachings, empirical observations, revelations, even dreams, visions, and cellular memory (Location 1006). Kovach explains:

“Because of the interconnection between all entities, seeking this information ought not to be extractive but reciprocal, to ensure an ecological and cosmological balance. Much insight comes to an individual inwardly and intuitively.” (Kovach, 2009, Location 1006)

Connection to land and place is found at the core of Indigenous knowing (Dei, 2014; Hirsch, 2015; & Shajahan, 2005). Smith, Tuck, and Yang (2019) state that perhaps the most *foundational* principles of Indigenous knowledges are: “*Water is life, and Land is our first teacher*” (p. 1). As such, Indigenous ways of knowing are not only relational, but that relationship are defined in terms of genealogy to place (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2013). Thus, research and education within the Indigenous paradigm not only value ecology, but center intrinsically on land and place. For example, Indigenous science emphasizes an interconnectedness with the environment (Bang & Marin, 2015), and education and social practices also reflect a sensitivity to the place each group is connected to constructing knowledge as it emerges from each place (Bishop et al, 2014; Dei, 2014).

Indigenous knowledges also hold to a spiritual understanding of themselves and the natural world (Aluli-Meyer, 2008; Dei, 2002; Rhee & Subedi, 2014). Dei (2002) explains that for many Indigenous people, knowledge emerges in a spiritual sense as the fundamental

understandings of self are as a spiritual being. Not only do Indigenous scholars make sense of their humanity and lived experiences within a spiritual context, but they also argue that to reclaim spirituality within research, education, and learning is a facet of Indigenous reclamation and decolonization (Aluli-Meyer, 2008; Dei, 2002; Windchief & San Pedro, 2019).

Indigenous knowledges bear significant potential for social action and self-determination. Hlalele (2019) defines Indigenous knowledge as: “the tacit know-how that is community based, unique, multiplex, constantly evolving, eclectic, non-formal and transferred from one generation to another in various contexts to aid Indigenous communities in solving problems and making fundamental decisions that are germane to their survival and adaptation in their daily actions within their natural habitat and value systems in distinct geographical locations” (p.2). This description of Indigenous knowledge reveals its intrinsic values in community values and in its acceptance of geographic cultural plurality. Prakash and Esteva (2008) echo this notion, writing that there is a “pluriverse” of knowledge that serves the people and places from which they are created. This dynamic and complex body of knowledge from within Indigenous communities themselves is best suited to articulating the realities each community determines for themselves, negating a notion of reliance on white saviors or colonial superiors to dictate policy of Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous scholars also argue that the Indigenous identity is not a relic of the past but rather is dynamic, modern, and as adaptable to the demands of modernity as any western or globalized identity is (i.e., Grande, 2015; Razack, 2009). The establishment of Indigenous

sovereignty over knowledge, land, language, time, and self is the impetus for Indigenous scholarship, especially as it counteracts the colonial effects of Indigenous erasure. Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua (2013) explains, “Such erasures and misrepresentations are common in settler colonial discourses that work to legitimize the seizure of land and political sovereignty from Indigenous nations by infantilizing them (Location 95). Thus, the work of centering an Indigenous Paradigm is a political move intended to resist settler-colonialism and uphold Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty. As Indigenous educational research informs education systems and schools for not only Indigenous folks but for all children, constructing a praxis towards the liberation of all through decolonizing and unsettling settler-colonial structures in alignment with Indigenous leadership is a crucial political move.

Indigenous scholars differ on their definitions and stances as it pertains to the establishment of the Indigenous identity, and conversely, the settler identity. Some scholars operate from a basis of a more narrowly defined Indigenous identity and classify most others as settlers. Others (i.e., Dei, 2016) theorize from a standpoint that tackles the complexity and nuance of the diasporic identity and work to distinguish it from the settler category. Some scholars (i.e., King, 2019) write to narrate the unique position of those descended from people stolen from Africa under the colonial establishment of chattel slavery and maintain that Black folks of such lineage cannot be settlers, though they now reside on land that is not their ancestral lands. Still others write from a more inclusive perspective and blur the lines of Indigenous identities with other “non-western” identities, though this stance has been

critiqued by newer voices of Indigenous scholarship (i.e., Tuck & Yang, 2012) as holding to colonized traditions and enabling “settler moves to innocence”. Many scholars within the field of Indigenous studies recognize the dialogue around Indigenous, Aboriginal, settler, colonizer, Black, diasporic, non-western “other”, and other such identifications are complex and often without fixed answers. However, there is often agreement within the field that in sustaining this dialogue, the impetus is toward further unsettling and dismantling of colonizing, anti-Indigenous, anti-Black, racist, capitalist hegemony so that something better and just can emerge (Dei, 2016; Grande, 2015; Smith, 2012; King 2019).

In bringing Indigenous knowledge to the forefront of academic theorizing, Indigenous scholars have also written to shape the lens of Indigenous theory as a theoretical lens within the academy. Kovach (2009) summarizes the work of Graham Smith in defining Indigenous Theory along the following characteristics:

“Located within a culturally contextual site, born of organic process involving community, the product of a theorist who has an understanding of the cultural epistemic foundations of an Indigenous worldview, focused on change, not universal but portable to other sites, flexible, engaged with other theoretical positionings (i.e., it is not an isolationist theory), critical, workable for a variety of sites of struggle, user-friendly – people can understand what the theorist is talking about.” (Smith, 2005, as cited in Kovach, 2009, p. 841)

Indigenous research aligns with research of other humanizing and critical traditions, such as

critical pedagogy, while upholding Indigenous authority as knowledge bearers and originators.

In situating research within the Indigenous paradigm, scholars challenge the colonial traditions inherent within the academy (Kovach, 2009; Patel, 2016; Smith, 1999). Furthermore, conducting research from within an Indigenous paradigm centers Indigenous futures, which some Indigenous scholars argue is paramount to the survival of all who live on this earth, and which embodies conditions of peace, human rights, and social justice (Chilisa, 2020).

Windchief and San Pedro (2019) argue that doing research which embodies Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies calls the audiences of the academy into the paradigm of Indigenous relationality and reciprocity, founded on trust that the audience “will listen, learn, and forward Indigenous sovereignty and relationality” (p. xi). This lends to the transformation and decolonization of the academy (Chilisa, 2020; Patel, 2016), thus informing the policies and social transformation of communities at a structural level (Dei, 2016; Goodyear-Ka ōpua, 2013). Indigenous theories have a particular potency in informing the transformation of educational spaces, in recentering the transmission of cultural, linguistic, and ontological knowledge authentic to each community. Critical Indigenous scholars (i.e., Chilisa, 2020; Dei, 2016; Kovach, 2009; Patel, 2016; Smith, 1999) recognize the crucial work of conducting research which shapes pedagogy within communities of Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks alike as they strive for self-determination, decolonization, and collective movement to actualize post-colonial and decolonized realities and Indigenous futures.

In a genealogical sense, all knowledge and pursuits of knowledge must relationally

situate themselves temporally and spatially to Indigenous knowledge (Dei, 2016; Rifkin, 2017). As critical educators who historically situate the most pervasive destruction of our natural environment and dehumanization of oppressed peoples within the global movement of colonization and imperialism, in problematizing coloniality, we must attend to Indigenous experiences and Indigenous knowledges as that which is not colonial. Furthermore, Indigenous knowledges represent a vast body of rich, dynamic, adaptable, collective, spiritual, critical, and transformative knowledge about our natural world, our humanity, and social and historical experiences. Indigenous voices continue to offer necessary insight and direction to Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities of those who seek criticality in shaping policy and social systems, including education and policy. Additionally, as a group most historically under attack and subject to erasure under colonial and settler-colonial structures, there is an urgent need to amplify Indigenous perspectives. As such, foregrounding Indigenous Knowledges serves to align our research and social justice work to a broader and more authentic direction of working towards justice, human rights and dignity, and harmony within the natural world.

My study which seeks to understand the stories of communities and schools who are themselves comprised of Indigenous folks or who align themselves within a paradigm that centers Indigenous futures as integral to any decolonizing and justice work for all oppressed entities; as such, learning to see from such a lens of Indigenous knowledges is necessary. Throughout this study, as I experience, observe, and engage with stories of *schools* which reject the western colonial definition, the Indigenous paradigm becomes the compass center of my

theoretical lens, to which I balance and align all other perspectives.

Anti/de/colonizing Theories

While Indigenous Theories are inherently anti-colonial, a broader body of scholarship has emerged under the names of anti-colonial theory, decolonizing theory, and post-colonial theory composed of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices. This body of academic thought is written from various entry points and perspectives as colonization has been experienced differently by diverse groups of people all over the world. There is some tension within the larger body of anti-colonial, decolonizing, and post-colonial writing with Indigenous epistemologies, particularly when non-Indigenous writers co-opt or fail to center or acknowledge Indigenous knowledges and agendas. Nonetheless, anti/de/colonizing theories, especially through the contribution of Indigenous thinkers and those in alignment with Indigenous movements who write within the field of anti/de/colonization, have served a significant role in political transformation towards removal of and resistance to colonial and settler-colonial systems and structures.

Anti/de/colonial praxis seeks to undo the effects of coloniality as it is replicated in socio-political structures, including traditional school systems (C*saire, 1972; Dei, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012). That which is anti/de/colonial opposes that which is colonial; decolonizing practice, then, is to be in agreement with the Indigenous agenda of self-determination and reclamation (Tuck, 2012). Anti/de/colonizing theory guides colonized communities and their allies towards practical ways of reclaiming autonomy through community work, reinforcing cultural systems

of knowledge and action, establishing policies to protect the interests and well-being of decolonizing communities, and creating spaces where Indigenous and colonized people are valued and celebrated (Berryman et al., 2013).

This study is conducted by and with participants who have lived under settler-colonial occupations and institutionalized systems and who labor to divest from such colonial systems. This necessitates the employment of an anti/de/colonial lens in this research. As a non-Indigenous researcher who strives to be in alignment with Indigenous communities, I must come to theory with a critical lens to discern which writings provide a coherent framework within which to make sense of my data as it emerges from decolonizing communities centered on Indigeneity.

Colonization is a movement of western european imperialism that began in the 15th century. Colonization primarily affects Indigenous communities, as historically, colonialism was a gross violence against Indigenous People, their bodies, their identities, and their cosmologies, and their lands (Dei, 2014; Fanon, 1963; Memmi, 1965). Furthermore, colonial imperialism and capitalist systems were carried out by the stealing of peoples from their homelands in Africa and the establishment of the chattel slave trade. As a result of colonizing globalization, other communities of racialized-colonized folks have been pushed out and into unfamiliar places where they are often subsumed by a colonizing system that privileges white hegemony. Thus, they are forced into situations of increased socio-economic hardships compared to those who fit into the white settler identity (Quijano, 2000).

Dominant discourse tends to narrate an interpretation of history in which colonization and its oppressive actions concluded in the past, yet anti/post/de/colonial scholars agree (in various ways) that this is hardly the case (e.g., Dei, 2014; Smith, 2012). Albert Memmi (1965) discusses colonialism as the imposition of dominance by Europeans over Indigenous and non-European people in a way that allows the European colonizers to benefit at the expense of the colonized, indicating that colonialism is an ongoing process of colonizing, in which the colonizers protect the interest of their privilege and continue the exploitation of the colonized. Thus, as Césaire (1972) notes, there is no one who colonizes innocently (p. 38), and colonization is a process that can only be carried out in the dehumanization of both the colonized and the colonizer (p. 41).

According to George J. S. Dei, “colonial must implicate anything that is ‘imposed’ and ‘dominating’” (Dei, 2014, p. 10). During the colonial era, domination over Indigenous groups by the colonizer were violent and undeniable, and these memories of violence remain in our collective memories despite the attempted erasure or watering down within the pedagogy of colonial legacy. Fanon (1963) describes violence as the unifying force of the colonizing people and how they rid themselves of their own insecurity to see themselves as superior to those whom they colonize (p. 50). This violence came in many forms of brutality including war, genocide, rape, and torture (Césaire, 1962; Memmi, 1965). It was also a violence against the culture, language, freedom, and dignity of entire peoples. Perhaps most irrevocably, colonization has been a systematic violence against what Fanon (1963) calls “the most essential

value” of colonized people: their land, which provides not only their bread but also their dignity (p. 8).

Following the historical overthrow of many colonial states, and the repatriation of some colonies (especially in Africa and India) to the local communities, anti-colonial discourse turned to address the ways in which the effects of colonization continued to have a grip on communities that had undergone colonization. Post-colonial writers such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha wrote in this context to expose colonization as it existed within Third World nations (a creation of class conditions by colonization) and with the ways in which colonization intersected with notions of culture and identity and thought production. Said (1979) exposes the ways in which western knowledge production formed as a binary creates a racist structure to position the west against “the Orient” or “the Other”. By creating “othering” non-european people, those who benefitted from and sustained colonial power structures were able to continue the process of degradation and dehumanization of others.

These colonizers institutionalized the colonial process into modern systems of government, education, and law (Smith, 2012; Quijano, 2000). This systematic replacement of Indigenous knowledges and languages with western ideologies attempts to internalize colonial dominance in all people through the process of hegemony (Gramsci 1975). Dei (2014) explains that colonial power relations are now “structured along the lines of patriarchy, racist colonialisms, capitalism, as well as other sites of difference, namely, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, language, disability, and sexuality” (p. 10); thus, colonizing almost all aspects of an

individual's social identity. Quijano writes from a Latin American context to describe the construction of global modernity as the outcome of colonization in North and South America.

Quijano (2007) writes:

“With the conquest of the societies and the cultures which inhabit what today is called Latin America, began the constitution of a new world order, culminating, five hundred years later, in a global power covering the whole planet. This process implied a violent concentration of the world's resources under the control and for the benefit of a small European minority and above all, of its ruling classes” (p. 215)

This discussion of coloniality in modern times intersects with the discussion of capital and capitalism. Quijano (2000) posits that *capital* “as a social relation based on the commodification of labor” (p. 217) existed before the conquest of America. However, *capitalism* began at this moment in history, in which an entire system “was structurally articulated to all other forms of organizing and controlling labor force and work” (p. 219). Quijano argues that this structure that began in America would become “the new Euro-centered, capitalist, colonial world power structure” (p. 221) and that with the emergence of the construction of race, a dehumanizing of bodies and separating from spirit, which allowed for the exploitation of people as slaves and objects for Eurocentric domination (Quijano, 2000). This anti-colonial discourse aligns with Marxist critical theory in its explanation of our collective existence under capitalism, which brings all people into a dehumanizing experience as we are reduced to products of labor.

Smith (2012) writes, “Globalization and conceptions of a new world order represent

different sorts of challenges for Indigenous peoples. While being on the margins of the world has had dire consequences, being incorporated within the world's marketplace has different implications and, in turn, requires the mounting of new forms of resistance" (location 699). It is under the conditions of globalization, as capitalist colonialism, that Indigenous and subaltern people face daily exploitation, subjugation, and dehumanization for the profit of the colonial beneficiary. As a response and resistance to these conditions, decolonization as a theoretical framework articulated by scholars, but also as a grassroots movement upheld by colonized communities, emerged as a concerted effort to redirect the course of history and reclaim stolen lands, bodies, and dignity.

Colonization is thus not a historical event, but rather an ongoing power structure, continuously created by new generations of colonizers who continue to benefit from the colonial system and to perpetuate the atrocities of domination to protect their privilege (Memmi, 1965). One of the primary tools used to carry out this domination is schooling—what C*saire (1962) calls "the hasty manufacturing of a few thousand subordinate functionaries...necessary for the smooth operation of business" (p. 42). It is also a place where we experience what Fanon (1963) described as a colonial intellectualization in which the colonized history is "distorted, disfigured, and destroyed" and the colonized is taught to regard colonialism as a source of benevolence while they must regard themselves as savage and less than human. Culture and language are attacked in the colonizer's attempt to erase the identity of the Indigenous person to make people forget that colonization stole and replaced the land

and power that rightfully belongs to Indigenous communities. It is this loss of dignity and cultural memory of the colonized that often reduces them to complicity and helps the colonizer to maintain his dominance. Resistance to this force of colonization, including refusal to lose dignity and, thus, refusal of the colonial agenda (Grande, 2015), is a part of decolonizing praxis.

On the basis that colonial destruction can and should be reversed, that Indigeneity should be honored, and that colonized people must have autonomy, decolonization is a necessary process by which these dreams may be actualized for colonized peoples (Shahjahan, 2005; Razack, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Villanueva, 2013). The concept of decolonization encapsulates various modes of “resistance to and liberation from structural colonial forces” (Ugarte, 2014, p. 405) some of which will be outlined in this section. Per decolonizing writers, decolonization is, among other aspects, an act of: healing (Dei, 2014), resisting (Cusicanqui, 2012; Dei, 2014; Razack, 2009), liberation (Borrego, 2016; Dei, 2014; Ugarte, 2014), teaching (Borrego, 2016; Razack, 2009), rebuilding (Ugarte, 2014) and reclaiming (Dei, 2014; Cusicanqui, 2012; Hirsch, 2015). Decolonization is a political agenda to reclaim autonomy and self-determination (Smith, 2012). Blenkinsop, Affifi, Piersol, and Danann (2017), further establish: “This anti-colonial discourse was characterized by a general refusal amongst colonized thinkers to engage with, focus on, or cater to the colonizer” (p.2). Thus, instead of well-meaning colonizers coming in to “solve the colonial problem”, decolonization is a movement of self-determined resistance from within the colonized communities, developing cultural pride and reclaiming autonomy (p. 2).

Smith (2012) in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, argues that research and education have long been tools of colonization; as such, research is not innocent or neutral. Smith (2012) forwards that decolonizing work must take on how we research and educate, including what we consider to be valid knowledge, how we arrive at this knowledge, and how we present this knowledge. Decolonizing research calls for non-Indigenous researchers to stop doing research *on* Indigenous people, ultimately an act of violence, coercion, and force parallel to other experiences of colonization on colonized people (Smith, 2012). Decolonizing research centers on Indigenous epistemologies, voices, and identities and upholds them to be valid sources of knowledge. Dei (2013) contends that decolonizing pedagogies must challenge Indigenous people to unlearn colonizing conditioning and reassert the learning that existed within Indigenous worlds; it asks for alternative spaces and ways to carry out Indigeneity.

Within the last decade, a group of Indigenous and decolonial scholars (i.e., Calderon, 2016; McCoy, Tuck, & MacKenzie, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012) have brought forth the framework of settler colonialism as response to academic and popular trends in which the term *decolonization* has been attached to various projects without attending to Indigenous experiences or present day conditions of settler colonialism as perpetuated by all non-Indigenous people who have settled in lands not of their own origin. Tuck & Yang (2012) argue that decolonization is not a metaphor. It is a specific agenda for an Indigenous future. It is necessitated by the conditions of settler colonialism which implicates not only white settlers, but also non-native people of color. Tuck & Yang (2012) also argue that simply referring to all people as colonized

(perhaps implicitly in reference to rhetoric made popular by Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) obscures the realities of our various relationships to being settler or Indigenous and is a move towards the settler erasure of Indigenous rights to lands and the realities of settler-colonial occupation.

Decolonization as praxis under settler-colonial occupation is concerned primarily with the repatriation of native land to native people, a movement that is grown from diverse Indigenous communities and must move in social, political, and educational spheres towards the reclaiming of sovereignty and land, on which all settlers dwell for all land is native land, for self-determined Indigenous existence. This process results in a loss of accumulation for all settlers, even marginalized ones, for an Indigenous world is one in which land is relational and sacred, never property or resource. Tuck and Yang (2012) maintain that decolonization is unsettling. It cannot answer what will happen to Non-native people after decolonization happens. To do so would once again decenter and take away from Indigenous people and their agenda. Thus, the authors conclude, decolonization is incommensurable with other social justice movements (see Tuck & Yang, 2012). Dei (2016) resonates with this conception and writes, “We know that decolonization is an ongoing, painful process. It calls for engaging discomfort and de-stabilizing knowing. It is about going where we have not been before and asking new questions” (p. 305).

Writers of decolonizing theories vary on their stances of who decolonizing theory is for or what can be done by whom about the problem of colonization. However, there is a collective

sense of urgency in the need to dismantle colonial structures. The dismantling of a dominant structure (especially one as large and pervasive as colonial white settler hegemony) necessitates a rebuilding, replacement, and reinvention of the world (as places, communities, and interconnected natural and social systems) we live in. While there are understandable tensions at play regarding how to understand this construction of our futures. For some Indigenous, Black, and decolonizing scholars, concern for a settler future is not their responsibility as they can only attend to the survivance of their own communities, having endured generations of trauma at the hands of colonizers. Other scholars have a more diplomatic approach and attempt to extend opportunities for learning, reconciliation, and allyship into colonial communities. Patel (2016) reminds us that while both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars can grapple with the questions around decolonization, it is important to continue to ask ourselves what or who is being decolonized and how can we accomplish a decolonizing work if the occupiers are still occupying stolen land? We must not forget to attend to the material concerns that colonization has caused.

Summary

Anti/post/de/colonial theories are complex and necessary responses to the conditions of our times. They are rooted in Indigenous struggle and hold emancipatory implications for those who have been reduced to slavery and labor (Quijano, 2000; Tuck & Yang, 2012). White scholars who have journeyed with decolonizing theories and practices also argue that there is possibility and necessity in white people unlearning colonial conditioning, a term some (i.e., Greenwood,

2009; Root; 2010) have also called decolonization. While Indigenous and non-Indigenous decolonizing scholars (i.e., Tuck & Yang, 2012; Smith, Tuck, Yang, 2019) do not argue against non-Indigenous folks engaging in critical, anti-colonial, and anti-racist praxis, they underscore that decolonization is a particular Indigenous agenda within the context of settler colonialism, and that all decolonizing work must necessarily foreground this Indigenous experience and heed to Indigenous direction.

This study emerges from conversations of folks (Trevor, Ndindi, and me along with our community members) who come to decolonizing work from diverse backgrounds, entry points, and places of understanding. Yet we are connected by our desire to decolonize and our belief that decolonization is necessary— not only for ourselves but for the well-being and sustainable future of the entire earth. Furthermore, decolonization is necessary to make right the wrongdoings and injustices of colonization—wrongdoings that are still conducted daily in the places of education that we inhabit. In many ways, my employment of a decolonizing lens, then, is the most apparent. Yet, I maintain that I cannot utilize decolonizing language without heeding Indigenous teaching and that decolonization is situated in place and connected to land. In this way, I weave anti/de/colonial theories to the other perspectives in my theoretical framework to understand the phenomenon of *school as communion*.

Theories of Connection: Sustainable Systems & Place

In this section I selectively weave together texts drawn from larger bodies of place-based, systems theories, and writings on spirituality, humanity, and connection. This research

tackles questions about space and place and the urgency of climate crises and other material effects of colonization. Thus, these texts drawing on theories of connection, sustainable systems, and place inform a deeper ontological understanding of the contextual phenomenon observed within the living systems in which data was collected, including the socially constructed systems that make up schools, communities, and places of meaning. As a note of critique, the fields of systems theory and place-based theory are often neither inherently critical nor do they foreground Indigeneity. As such, I have chosen to focus on the writers and texts who have emerged from various fields including systems, place, sustainability, and spirituality and who align with Indigenous, Critical, and anti-colonial thought in their explanation of human connection to the natural world, to place, and to one another.

This section is a survey of the texts and teachers on connection, systems, and place which contour my understandings of the ontological backdrop in which we live, move, and act. bell hooks (2009) writes about humanity's ontological search for answers: "We want to know whether it is possible to live on the earth peacefully. Is it possible to sustain life?" (p. 1). These theories of connection then also support my examination of data through a lens which calls into question how we can better sustain life on this earth and understand the natural environments and life forms we are connected to.

Sustainable Systems Thinking

As humans have contemplated our existence, whether looking to the stars, or digging to earth's core, or finding a place of stillness within, we and our ancestors have found patterns of

interconnection (Capra & Luisi, 2018). The epistemological and ontological foundations of most cultures have been systemic and interconnected in nature. Systems thinking today invokes a return to interconnection, grounded in observation of the natural world. Resisting the paradigm of hierarchical, linear mechanisms of colonizing industrialization, systems thinking represents a paradigm of the self-organizing, nested networks and webs of life (Capra & Luisi, 2018; Davis et al, 2015; Meadows, 2008), which place-based and Indigenous thinkers hold central to their ontologies (Meyer, 2008; Greenwood, 2008). In this sense, it is not uncommon for Indigenous and anti-colonial scholars (i.e., Aluli-Meyer, 2008; Patel, 2016) to turn to the writings of quantum scientists, sustainable systems thinkers, and theorists of connection to support our ontological explanations of our experiences and observed phenomena.

The following key concepts which I have gleaned from the writings of systems theorists are most salient to this study: relationships and information, self-organization, emergence, non-linear, and living is learning. I discuss them briefly below.

Relationships & Information (interconnection & language)

We begin by conceptualizing all that we know about life and the world we live in as a series of nested systems, existing in coordination for a common goal (Churchman, 1968). The idea of relationship is fundamental to these interconnected systems. According to Capra & Luisi (2018) “twentieth-century science has shown repeatedly that all natural phenomena are ultimately interconnected, and that their essential properties, in fact, derive from their relationships to other things” (p. 2). This idea of relationship extends through biological,

ecological, to social spheres and beyond. As researchers interested in bringing forth a better world, we need to understand that improvement happens through improving relationships among constituent parts, rather than optimizing parts in isolation (Stroh, 2015). The focus of relationships in systems thinking speaks to the relational ways that Indigenous and collective cultures have always existed, with humans and with our natural environment. Relationships, according to critical and decolonizing scholars (i.e., Noddings, 2005; Freire, 1970; Smith, 2012), is necessary for teaching and learning.

Relationships in systems are formed and maintained by the flow of information in a circular process called feedback (Capra & Luisi, 2018; Meadows, 2008; Stroh, 2015). Feedback loops convey information about the outcome of any process or activity to its source (Capra & Luisi, 2018, p. 89). Feedback loops then work to either amplify or balance behavior within the system, based on the messages conveyed and the value attached. (Capra & Luisi, 2018; Davis et al, 2015; Meadows, 2008). All systems experience a tension in duality between two types of feedback loops—that which seeks to achieve homeostasis and that which seeks growth or change. A system is thus primed to both grow and remain the same (Meadows, 2008). When the flow of communication through the feedback loops is precise, timely, and concrete, the system can respond most efficiently to its present conditions, evolving or maintaining in the ways that are most suited to the system's survival on a whole (Capra & Luisi, 2018; Meadows, 2008). When information is delayed, distorted, or misdirected, feedback loops can play into a great imbalance within the system. In the same way that cancer distorts the feedback to the body to

protect its own growth while devastating all other subsystems within the body, so too do oppressive social systems, such as colonialism and capitalism, abuse feedback channels (i.e., media, education, news) to ensure their own rampant growth at the detriment of other systems of life.

Because communication is so fundamental to a systems behavior, it is imperative that all researchers and practitioners within social systems understand the power of language, the flow of information, and how it is directed and received throughout the system. Complex social systems involve “multiple feedback loops through which values, beliefs, and rules of conduct are continually communicated, modified, and sustained” (Capra & Luisi, 2018, p. 310). It is for this reason that Meadows (2008) asserts that we must keep language as “concrete, meaningful, and truthful as possible” to keep the information streams clear, while also reminding systems thinkers that we must “enlarge language to make it consistent with our enlarged understanding of systems” (p. 175). The messages that are conveyed throughout our social networks bear the power to trigger the behavior of the entire social system. This notion reminds us of the need for criticality in examining education and media, both powerful streams of information in society.

These notions of relationships, interconnection, and communication directly align with the core tenets of this study, Indigenous knowledges and critical examination of our world, communities, and education systems. These ontological explanations for our natural world, with its inherent interconnections and essential ways that communication impacts the ability of the collective whole to thrive, support our foundational seeing of the communities we research

with, as they are situated in relational connections to place, to social systems, and to one another internally.

Self-organization *(no need for institution)*

The colonial establishment of the nation-state and all institutions of power within it are predicated on the fallacy that a governing entity, presumably with greater knowledge or merit than the rest of the system, must organize a system using force into a hierarchical structure. However, the living systems of our natural world and the systems thinkers who study them (including Indigenous thinkers) argue otherwise. Capra & Luisi (2018), begin their explanation of self-organization at the molecular level and expand their discussion to dynamic social and natural ecosystems, saying that: “the key characteristic of such dynamical systems is that they generally operate far from equilibrium, and yet are capable of producing stable, self-organizing structures” (p. 158). The authors further connect this observation of self-organization in systems, great and small, simple and complex, to the theory of Gaia Earth as a self-organizing living system, a notion that implicates intelligence and upon which many ancient and Indigenous cosmologies formed their relational beliefs about Earth as Mother and Teacher. This conception of Gaia Earth was later corroborated, in various ways, by scientists such as Prigione, Lovelock, and Maturana (see Capra & Luisi, 2018).

Understanding the principle of self-organization, along with other connected principles of systems thinking serves a two-fold purpose in this study: (1) it illustrates how a transdisciplinary approach, including perspectives from physical sciences which are often

assumed to belong to a western paradigm, corroborates and validates Indigenous views of the world and (2) inherent in the principle of self-organization are the values of cooperation and balance (what systems thinkers call stability); these notions undermine the tenets of colonial hierarchy which drives greed, control, and unsustainability. With this lens, we can draw our attention to the many systems, both in our natural world and human social systems, that have continuously demonstrated self-organization working effectively. This theory supports our seeing of communities as self-organizing systems with the capacity to educate its own members and evolve into systems more conducive for all members to thrive, such as authentic communal schools.

Emergence (magical & spiritual)

A fundamental feature of systems and interconnected thinking is called emergence—the idea that a quality emerges from the whole that cannot be found by simply adding together all the parts (Capra & Luisi, 2018; Davis et al, 2015; Meadows, 2008). As Capra and Luisi (2018) describe this phenomenon, “the essential properties of a living system are emergent properties – properties that are not found in any of the parts but emerge at the level of the system as a whole” (p. 23). The concept of emergence is influential in shifting our focus from pieces in isolation. In like manner, if we try to understand the world that we live in by studying pieces of information in isolated disciplines without acknowledging the interconnections among bodies of knowledge, we miss the emergent properties of the greater system.

Capra & Luisi (2018) describe the process of emergence is catalyzed by “a certain

openness within the organization, a willingness to be disturbed, in order to set the process in motion” (p. 319), indicating a unique values system maintained from within that system which prioritizes some feedback higher than others, and allows action of the system to flow from that valuation of feedback. From an Indigenous perspective, we recognize that a plurality of values emerges from place and culture to guide its members’ actions.

Emergence helps us to understand the power of the collective that we observe within our communities who seem to do the impossible in sustaining autonomous schools in the face of great adversity within a settler-colonial system. The coming together of all members of the community in a unified way allows for a power and tertiary potential to emerge that cannot be understood by breaking apart each community into smaller factors or pieces. Likewise, our examination in this study does not attempt to replicate the formula of various parts, rather, we observe the holistic phenomena that emerge in an interconnected, even spiritual, manner.

Non-linear and Approximate (*paradigms beyond*)

Within mathematics and physical sciences, thinkers, such as Ilya Prigogine, recognized an insufficiency in linear equations and classic deterministic physics to describe the natural phenomena. Prigogine’s research offered a new non-linear paradigm drawing on discoveries in quantum science to formulate a new understanding of time, self-organization out of chaos, and give greater nuance to our understanding of Einstein’s relativity, eliminating the anthropocentric features and daunting power of that his formulation attributed to the observer over his environment (Prigogine, 1996, p, 151). Systems thinking has grown out of this new

paradigm of science, in which phenomena are neither linear nor certain. A “nonlinear relationship is one in which the cause does not produce a proportional effect” (Meadows, 2008, p. 27).

The ability to produce a non-proportional effect on a system with minimal action, became known as the butterfly effect, referencing a meteorologist’s comment on the disproportionate outcomes in weather by minute factors, quipping that a butterfly flapping its wings in New York could cause a hurricane in Florida (Davis et al, 2015). The butterfly effect idea has transcended into popular awareness and is sometimes used by educators, social activists, and movement makers to describe the phenomenon of actions at the individual level having a ripple effect throughout society. Critical place-based scholars and anti-colonial movement makers often invoke the butterfly effect in our reaching for the critical hope Freire (1994) urges is necessary for enacting social transformation.

Because relationships in complex living systems are non-linear, (Capra & Luisi, 2018; Meadows, 2008) we often observe emergent properties and relationships between action and response as mysterious, unexpected, and even confusing. Non-linear systems cannot be described with linear precision; there is always a degree of unpredictability, disproportion, and dynamics. Capra and Luisi (2018) insist, “twentieth-century science has shown very clearly that there can be no absolute scientific truth, that all our concepts and theories are necessarily limited and approximate” (p. 22). This marks a definitive shift away from Cartesian certainty and validates the intuitive, non-linear, interconnected perspectives of Indigenous and non-

western ontologies, even opening a door for many systems thinkers to converge with Indigenous thinkers in the realm of the spiritual and mystical (e.g. Meyers, 2008; Wilbur, 2000).

The data of this study must respect non-linear properties, not only as an aspect of natural life, but also as an epistemological value of Indigenous sense-making. To fully align with the stories and experiences shared with me by the co-storyers of this study, I must see non-linearity as an ontological truth.

Living is learning (*place is teacher*)

Because systems theory attempts to explain the nature of life, as humans we cannot avoid asking what it means “to know”. Maturana and Varela (1980) state that “to live is to know”. Because all living organisms function based on the processing of information through feedback loops, and undergoing subsequent structural changes, systems thinkers conclude that living and learning are inseparable. Capra and Luisi (2018) synthesize that “Cognition, then, is not a representation of an independently existing world but rather a continual bringing forth of a world through the process of living” (p. 256) a concept that mirrors Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) notion of “becoming” in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

However, Maturana and Varela (1980) distinguish between the cognition present across all life forms, and consciousness which they identify as “a cognitive process that emerges when cognition reaches a certain level of complexity. The central characteristic of this special cognitive process is the experience of self-awareness—to be aware not only of one’s

environment but also of oneself” (as cited by Capra & Luisi, 2018, p. 257). Consciousness allows us to formulate values, beliefs, and goals, and is thus fundamentally linked to social phenomena (Capra & Luisi, 2018, p. 260). Thus, systems thinkers, such as David Stroh (2015) posit that “increasing self-awareness is an intervention in and of itself, and the precursor to making any other changes” (location 939). Freire (1997) wrote a similar argument: “the ability to reflect, to evaluate, to program, to investigate, and to transform is unique to human beings in the world and with the world. Life becomes existence and life support becomes world when the conscience about the world—which also implies the conscience of the self—emerges and establishes a dialectical relationship with the world” (p. 34). When we understand the role of consciousness and the potential for conscious action in all that we do in life, this understanding begs for a reconceptualization of learning that far extends beyond the time and place of any intuition, such as those posed by colonial systems.

This notion supports our examination of the schools in this study as they make moves to construct educational models further connected to real-world living and to their natural environments. Place-based learning and hands-on learning are key aspects of the educational models included in this study. As such, the principle of living as learning as explained by systems thinkers, helps us to understand this type of pedagogy the schools of this study employ.

Theories of Place/Space/Land

Place-based theory involves the awareness of place in our human consciousness and seeks to surface the connection we must place to achieve more authentic ways of knowing and

being. Gruenwald describes the foundations of place-based theory as “phenomenology, critical geography, bioregionalism, ecofeminism, and place-conscious traditions such as imaginative literature and Native American thought (2003, p. 6). Johnson (2010) echoes that place-based theory grows from Indigenous scholars and their inherent connection to place and the natural environment. Johnson also extends the reach of place-based theory into critical urban pedagogy, narrating the understanding of specific experiences and identify-forming of marginalized communities dwelling within urban spaces, as being shaped directly by their cityscapes and geographical phenomena (2010). For environmental theorists, place-based theory aims to reconnect human consciousness to the non-human world for the benefit of both people and the planet (Gruenwald, 2016). For Indigenous and decolonizing thinkers, place-based theory is a natural extension of the reclamation and re-inhabitation of land and places that were taken from them and changed, even destroyed, by colonizing forces (Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2019). This work embodies multiple levels, physical, mental, and spiritual and results in a restored condition for both the land and the decolonizing communities (Johnson, 2010, Stevenson, 2008).

Place-based theory branches from Decolonizing theory and Indigenous epistemologies (i.e., Greenwood, 2008; Johnson, 2010; Root, 2010; Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2019). I do not find theories of place, space, and land to be distinct from decolonizing theories, which always remind us of the ways in which colonization had to do with a violent dismemberment of people from the places to which they belong (Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2019). Place-based theory

understands the specific experiences and identify-forming of communities as being shaped directly by their geographic context (Johnson, 2010). This theory is useful for this study as we narrate the experiences of each site, as schools that are reflective of the distinct cultural geographies which make them, and as sites of land and place-based pedagogies.

The Problem with Placelessness & Placeless Cultures

Place-based writers agree that placelessness is a common condition of the western condition, which has now become or is becoming the global condition (Johnson, 2010). It is embedded in our dominant human systems. From school to work to home, our daily activities rarely take place outside. This disconnection from the earth and natural landscape is the inception and reinforcement of our loss of place-consciousness. Once we have lost place-consciousness and connection, we readily maintain oppressive conditions for the earth and, by extension, to humanity (Gruenwald, 2008). Gruenwald (2003) states, "The problem is that human institutions, such as schools, governments, and corporations, have not demonstrated an orientation of care consciousness toward the places that they manipulate, neglect, and destroy" (p.624). As a species, we are facing irreversible consequences for our desecration of the earth, and still we have not yet found ubiquitous solutions and pathways towards restoration. In this urgency, place-based critical conversations have risen to problematize and theorize solutions (Gruenwald, 2003, 2008).

Johnson (2010) describes colonization and its erasure of pluralistic epistemology grounded in place: "Our landscapes are the storied histories, cosmogonies, philosophies and

sciences of those Indigenous knowledges which are increasingly being pushed aside by the ‘gray uniformity’ of globalization and its progenitor, European colonization...” (p. 832) Johnson argues then, that the purpose of place-based pedagogy is that “acknowledging the multiplicity of the ways in which various peoples explore and conceive of the world is fundamental to reversing the atomistic approach within Western science” (p. 833). With place-formed knowledge, we return to the localized care of the earth, its resources, and the inhabitants of that space.

Place & Indigeneity

Indigenous theorists assert that place-based thinking, by nature, is Indigenous, for the identity of their people is as a place-based people (i.e., Meyer, 2008; Johnson 2010). For Indigenous place theorists such as Keith Basso, this lack of consciousness of place is what distinguishes western culture and systems from Indigenous place-conscious cultures; the very act of colonization stripped Indigenous people from their ability to maintain their reciprocal relationship to the earth (as cited in Johnson, 2010). The work of decolonizing place-based action is to restore habitation, through the reclamation of sovereignty to displaced, colonized communities (Johnson, 2010).

Place-based theorists, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, have specific interest in eco-justice (i.e., Gruenwald, 2008; Johnson, 2010; Root, 2010). One of the longest-lasting effects of colonization has been the stealing of Indigenous lands and destruction of natural ecosystems. As such, place-based educators (i.e., Greenwood & Smith, 2008; Johnson, 2010)

feel an ethical call to work toward the restoration of land and ecosystems, including in education and policy, guided by Indigenous expertise and authority (Blenkinsop, Affifi, Piersol, & Danann Sitka-Sage, 2017; Root, 2010). Place-based theory also offers a framework for non-Indigenous scholars to work in concert with Indigenous movements (i.e., Blenkinsop et al., 2017; Meyerhoff, E., & Thompsett, F. 2017; Root, 2010). This work is done by foregrounding Indigenous knowledge, decolonizing our relationship to the land, interrogating self, being reflective and reflexive, and listening and honoring Indigenous epistemology as a source of origin, without co-opting or burdening Indigenous communities with a neediness to receive instruction, time, or resources directly from them (Root, 2010). Sandy Grande (2015) reminds us to resist the white tradition of romanticizing ““Indian-as-ecologically-noble savage” (.94), a move that serves the settler agenda of erasing Indigenous presence capacity for technological authority in modern times. Grande (2015) writes:

“In this context, the voices of Indigenous and other non-Western peoples become increasingly vital, not because such peoples categorically possess any kind of magical, mystical power to fix countless generations of abuse and neglect, but because non-Western peoples and nations exist as living critiques of the dominant culture, providing critique-al knowledge and potentially transformative paradigms” (p.95)

The solution given by Indigenous scholars such as Grande (2015) to our environmental crises lies in Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination in a way that unsettles and dismantles colonial structure through revolutionary pedagogy.

Conceptualizing Land/Place/Space

One of the challenges that place-based theorists have in positing their theories (specifically, in an academy that is not well-versed in Indigenous understandings of place) is to first define “place”, when place is itself a common experience, not an academic term (Gruenwald 2003, Johnson 2010). Gruenwald writes, “Phenomenologically, places are the ground of direct human experience (2003 p.623,). Jay Johnson further conceptualizes place as “the embodied location of everyday struggle for meaning; political, cultural and economic” (2010, p.830). Place-based thinkers have come to agree that place is more than, or distinguishable, from geographic space (which it is comprised of) in that there is a non-physical element of meaning to a place—ascribed from human experience. This experience can be naming, inhabiting, and storing of memories as located within a particular space, what Johnson refers to as “place-making”, something anyone can do (2010, pp. 830-831). Therefore, all locations of human activity are places. Gruenwald further posits that “Each one of us is a product of a lifetime of environmental and cultural education that includes our embodied experience of places” (Gruenwald, 2008, p.146). We can see here that not only are places containers for our lived experiences, but they are also our canvas on which we can see and understand our experience.

Place/Space/Land & Learning

For true decolonial learning to take place, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars acknowledge the necessity of positioning our learning in place and in Indigeneity. Styres (2019)

puts forth:

“For those who want to live in deeply sacred and intimate relationship to Land must understand that it first and foremost requires a respectful and consistent acknowledgment of whose traditional lands we are on, a commitment to journeying—a seeking out and coming to an understanding of the stories and knowledges embedded in those lands, a conscious choosing to live in intimate, sacred, and storied relationships with those lands and not the least of which is an acknowledgment of the ways one is implicated in the networks and relations of power that comprise the tangled colonial history of the lands one is upon” (p. 29)

Colonized communities will find a reconnection and re-membering of their identities which exist beyond the colonial paradigm, when they engage with place and Land as their teacher and the context of their existences (Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2019).

For descendants of colonizing cultures, Greenwood (2009) offers that place-based learning is an opportunity to challenge settlers in their complicity with systems that have legitimized the destruction of Indigenous people and their lands and also acknowledge their own wounds from that culture of militarism and separateness from the land, because it allows for moments of consciousness between settler societies and indigenous which reveals the insecurity and reexamination of morals in relationship to land and identity (p. 2). Place-consciousness guides us to listen to Native voice and their stories of survivance and their relationship with land and brings us to ask: “What in this place needs to be remembered,

restored, conserved, transformed, or created?” (Greenwood, 2009, p. 4).

Place/Space/Land Theories as Decolonizing Praxis & Webs of Interconnection

According to scholars such as Gruenwald (2008), Johnson (2010), and Stevenson (2008), place-based pedagogy is critical by nature. It seeks to resist the oppression of dominant systems, to reimagine sociological systems, and to restore a condition of justice for both earth and humanity. This means that place-based pedagogy is, in its essence, a departure from the western colonial trap of text-only, institutionalized-only instruction and, instead, locates the creation of knowledge in “real” places and the meaning that is made by those who experience those places. Place-based thinkers also agree that the objective of such a pedagogy is for the health and well-being of the natural ecology as well as marginalized communities—those who have been the most displaced by colonization (Greenwood, 2008; Johnson, 2010).

In disrupting hegemony, place-consciousness, as decolonizing praxis, brings us to a place of plurality. Greenwood (2009) describes: “Although place is often spoken of in the singular, places are best thought of in the plural, as our lives touch a great variety of interconnected places, each holding a variety of sometimes competing and conflicting stories” (p. 1). When we begin to conceptualize the plurality of places, cultures, languages, and the ontologies they birth, Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) rhizomatic web of interconnected plurality becomes an illustrative metaphor. Place/land-based theories then resonate with explanations within systems thinking to describe our natural world and do so within a decolonizing agenda which explicitly seeks to return sovereignty to Indigenous people who have demonstrated

throughout history that their cosmologies, rooted in place, are necessary in guiding our species towards sustainable, reciprocal relations with our planet.

Sustainable systems thinkers who patiently and meticulously observe our natural systems have arrived at place of deep interconnection with all living things in a way that is spiritual for many who come from western contexts, yet natural for many who come from Indigenous and eastern cultures (Capra, 1975). I do not find it to be a stretch to surface systems thinking next to decolonizing and place-based theories; rather I find a rich, supportive conversation that draws all three into one, much the way systems thinkers and eastern philosophers regard everything in life (see Capra, 1975; Longxi, 1992). Systems thinking in bringing us to a deeper understanding of our position within the universe, effortlessly subverts the anthropocentric notions which give way to the colonial and racist agendas of colonization.

Theory Coming Together & Possible Limitations

The theoretical lens for this study draws from fields of critical pedagogy, anti/de/colonizing theories, and theories of systems and place. Anti/de/colonizing thinking is inherently place-based; place-based thinking calls on sustainable systems thinking; sustainable systems thinking uplifts Indigenous epistemologies to inform consciousness that would serve the natural places and diverse living communities of our earth. It is frequent practice to select one or two theories to employ within a study, and to demonstrate deep understanding and adept utility at employing the selected theoretical lens. In selecting from so many different fields of theoretical writing to construct a layered theoretical lens for this study, I risk engaging

with each theory only topically and possibly creating a lack of cohesion among the selected theories. However, I have come to each body of theory intentionally and grounded within the research, the problems I examine, and the relationships with scholars and scholarships who shape my research study and researcher identity. Each theory authentically shapes my seeing and discussion of the data I gather and the themes I construct in this study. Allowing freedom to draw from various disciplines and fields of knowledge becomes an intentional research move of *bricolage* which Kincheloe, McLaren, Steinberg, and Monzó call “a key innovation in evolving criticality” (p. 237).

In this exercise, it is crucial that I strive for coherence and alignment of theories, which I do by centering all theories in relationship to the paradigm of Indigenous Knowledge. Furthermore, I draw together theories that uphold criticality, social transformation, anti/de/colonial directions, and ontological understandings of the interconnectedness of all living things and collective need for sustainable conditions to perpetuate life. With this theoretical foundation, we can look deeply into the phenomenon of alternative learning spaces, emerging at the grassroots of communities to answer the needs of decolonization, cultural self-determination, ecological stewardship, and meaningful interconnection of systems for the sustainability of our whole earth.

Chapter 3– Literature Review:

Emerging Communal Learning Places of Radical Belonging

This chapter regards existing literature as letters from those who have gone before, their accounts as stories from the field in which I situate my research. In reading and considering texts from the canon along with recent scholarship, I aim to support this study with existing literature, as this study poses problems which have previously been established in the literature. I also look for voices that implicate that this research direction is relevant and necessary. However, I do so with awareness of the problematic traditions in western research of engaging with literature non-relationally, an exercise which decontextualizes information and distances the researcher from the Indigenous paradigm (Wilson, 2008). I sit with Eve Tuck's (2019) writing about engaging with the literature of other Indigenous scholars: "One thing that I feel like I have learned from Linda Tuhiwai Smith is how to engage our writing as letters out to other Indigenous people, who are working in their own ways to decolonize their home territories and the other spaces they move within" (p. 5). Though Tuck and Wilson both write as Indigenous scholars within an Indigenous research paradigm, as a non-Indigenous scholar learning from Indigenous scholars and other decolonizing scholars, I reflect on ways I too can further refuse colonizing traditions in academia (Tuck & Yang, 2013), and hold to the relationality and humility that is intrinsic to Indigenous paradigms.

This chapter, then, is a conversation with those who have wondered similar things to

me. I am critical of accounts which perpetuate colonized thinking, as much as I am critical of myself and my limited understanding of the topics I inquire about and the ways that my mind is also colonized. In this exercise of reflexivity and engaging with literature as dialogue, I discuss the problem with dominant schools, including their implications in dehumanizing colonization and in the destruction of natural environments. I then present the need for alternatives while troubling the problem of white spaces in current alternative schools. Finally, I establish the need for Indigenous-centered, land-based, inclusive, and accessible autonomous alternatives to be grown from the grassroots of each community.

Engaging with Literature: Purpose, Methods, & Limits

Over the course of this study, I repeatedly visited Google Scholar and the Chapman University search engines to delineate the boundaries of my search with various combinations of search terms, including: “grassroots, community, alternative, democratic, autonomous, free, small, progressive, place-based, land-based, holistic, systems sustainability, ecopedagogy, decolonizing, anti-colonial, culturally-responsive, Indigenous, minoritized, or racialized” among others along with “education, school, and learning”. I also explored amazon.com book recommendations and academia.edu articles on similar works. I revisited and included works from the university library, my own library, and that of my advisers and co-storyers. My purpose was to find a place in the literature in which the three strands of my wonderings converged: (1) alternative learning places for children, autonomous from colonizing school systems, (2) decolonizing, Indigenous, or communities of marginalized “others” creating

learning as cultural autonomy and reclamation, and (3) pedagogies that intentionally reflect place-based, land-conscious values.

Through this search, I identified key books or articles that carved pathways into the field of academic discourse around their respective issues. I also found articles published within the last ten years which serve as examples of how the three strands of my search have converged (to varying degrees) in the scholarship of other researcher-educators. As I narrate what the terrain of literature spoke to me, I will highlight the ways in which current scholars identify the problems with schools, present a review of recognized alternative learning places, and narrate what I found when I looked for what I call authentic, alternative learning places which emphasize either decolonial praxis or eco-conscious praxis or both.

The Problem with Schools & The Context of Coloniality

Ivan Illich (2000) in *Deschooling Society*, begins by claiming that: “The search for alternatives in education must therefore start with an agreement on what it is we mean by ‘school’” (Chapter 2, paragraph 2) and he goes on to put forth a working definition of school as “the age-specific, teacher-related process requiring full-time attendance at an obligatory curriculum” (Chapter 2, paragraph 2). Though this definition is broad it can serve to evoke the notions that many of us have been conditioned to associate with schooling. Many critical and anti-colonial scholars agree, Illich included, that the project of schooling in a colonial context is not neutral, but rather an institution designed to carry out a colonial agenda of imperial power (Freire, 1970; Illich, 2000; McLaren, 2015). This colonizing agenda is carried out in ways ranging

from as apparently harmless as assimilation to technological advances in modernity (Borrero et al, 2012) to the atrocious violence against non-white bodies and the plundering of their land (Sherwood, 2004). In defining colonization, Greenwood (2009) delineates: “a) the historical practice from the colonial era through the present of dominating other people’s territory and other people’s bodies and minds for the production of privilege maintained by military, political, and economic power, and b) other assimilative cultural patterns (e.g., schooling or consumerism) that over-determine or restrict possibilities for people and places” (p. 1).

Aside from the more apparent legacy of colonial violence, the power of the colonial agenda in educational systems to achieve a global domination is due largely to its ability to reinvent and disguise itself in seemingly innocuous ways. To be a critical educator then, as Freire (1970) writes, is to name the hidden agenda in institutions that we are made to believe exist for the benefit of society. Our concern for the society, shaped by the state is encouraged, while our natural concern for self, family, community, and our natural places of belonging are repressed at an early age through the school system (Blenkinsop, Affifi, Piersol, & Danann Sitka-Sage, 2017). Althusser (1971) referred to formal schools in capitalist societies as ideological state apparatus (ISA’s) for repressive state authority, to which Elmore (2017) refers to as the “tradition of miseducation for control”. As implementation systems of state ideologies, schools are used to reproduce social stratification along racial and class lines, allowing for the condition in which a minority benefits while the rest struggle to live—a notion that contextualizes the

critical scholars' response to action and call for transformative pedagogy (Freire, 1970; McLaren 2015).

What's in a name? Giving Colonized Meaning to "School"

Kupferman (2018) illuminates the sinister and powerful effect of language in the colonization of schooling. Current colonial systems have obscured the meaning of education by co-opting the word as an adjective that universally describes *their* institutional schooling systems and done so with such dominant force that the original, authentic meaning of education (apart from and preceding schools) has been forgotten and continues to be erased at the detriment and desecration of Indigenous and non-western knowledges and ways of learning and educating.

Thus, there is an important distinction to be made between the meanings of the words "education" and "school". If we allow the two to be conflated, and even more detrimentally, if we reverse the order of origin and assume that education necessarily emerges out school, implying exclusivity and causality, we forget the natural source of learning and comply in the erasure of authentic, education systems that long preceded the colonial institution of schooling. This forgetting is most dangerous for what Prakash and Esteva (2008) call "the people at the grassroots"—the Indigenous, and non-Indigenous others (Borrero, Yeh, Cruz, & Suda, 2012) whose places, cultures, knowledges, and lands have been systematically attacked, devalued, desecrated, and stolen.

Prakash and Esteva (2008) point out that when the law of scarcity, a hallmark of colonial

economics, is applied to learning and knowledge, it creates a condition in which the people at the grassroots do not have equal access to the resources within the system which has taken learning and commodified it. Thus, they are forced into a continuous state of being the most vulnerable and depleted members of society (Prakash & Esteva, 2008). They also experience monopolizing of the opportunity for their own ways of living and learning to thrive (through the taking of land, or forcing of policies such as mandated education), to maintain the conditions in which “education” can be a commodity of the state, and ultimately the conditions which perpetuate capitalist wealth. Yet, one of the reasons that the colonial use of the school system may not be viewed as seemingly sinister as other aspects of colonialism is because dominant media and discourse has convinced colonized subjects that they are recipients of the benefit of dominant institutional systems (Orelus, 2013, p. 3). Essentially, colonization has succeeded in creating a neutral conception of “school” as a politics-free system where all students are given equal opportunity to learn and grow. Critical scholarship (Freire, 1970, Illich, 2000; McLaren, 2015) have demonstrated this not to be true, revealing the damaging colonial agendas embedded within school systems.

Indigenous & Racialized-colonized “Other”

This study is primarily concerned with access to authentic, autonomous schools for those who have been most denied access under colonial structures: both Indigenous communities and (Prakash & Esteva, 2008) and communities of non-Indigenous racialized-colonized “others”, who, as Kumashiro (2000) defines, may belong to groups “that have been

traditionally marginalized in society, i.e., that are other than the norm, such as students of color, students from under- or unemployed families, students who are female or male but not stereotypically “masculine,” and students who are, or are perceived to be, queer [i.e. lesbian or gay]” (p. 26)”. In demarcating who benefits from the dominant colonial system and who doesn’t, there must be a process of minoritizing or othering—manufactured meaning by the colonial agenda to make invisible or to commodify as capital (Hundle, 2019). SooHoo (2006) defines “othering” as “a dynamic social construction imposed on groups or individuals by those who have more power and authority” (p. 7). Borrero, Yeh, Cruz, & Suda (2012) note “othering” being imposed in contexts which involve “(a) cultural and racial ambiguity, (b) categorization and labeling, (c) hierarchical power dynamics, and (d) limited access to resources” (p.1). The authors (Borrero et al, 2012) also make mention of multi-cultural, multi-racial children as also being minoritized others, often invisible in dominant discourses, whose complex identities and intersectionalities do not escape the marginalization and devaluing of traditional schooling.

Schools, then, are the spaces in this colonizing system in which the process of othering children is conducted, where some children become socialized to believe that they are “other” than the “norm” because they belong to groups outside of the dominant one (Borrero et al, 2012; Delpit, 2006; SooHoo, 2006). Inherent to the belief that one is “other” than the norm is the belief that one is less valuable, creating an emotional condition that dehumanizes the whole person and limits their ability to self-actualize (Delpit, 2006; hooks, 1994). Recent literature (Borrero et al, 2012; Hundle, 2019; Love, 2019; Neverson, 2014) continues to document the negative realities

that these children face every day in schools: lack of representation, tokenizing, micro-aggression, racism and bullying, erasure of identities and epistemologies from school curriculum, forced measurements against state standards and creation of illusions of failure, and coercion into conformity for the colonial agenda, among other traumas. An entire population of minoritized children emerges from schools largely believing that their voices are not heard or welcomed (hooks, 1994; Delpit, 2006; SooHoo, 2006) and many are ultimately resigned to be complicit pawns for the labor needs of the colonizing machine.

The history of schools being used as oppressive tools of colonization traces back most deeply in Indigenous communities. It has been a widespread practice among colonial settlers in North America to institutionalize Indian schools which would serve the purpose of erasing the language, culture, and beliefs of Indigenous people (Grande, 2015; Mays & Whalen, 2019; Tuck & Yang 2012). The curriculum and structure of colonizing schools was designed to conform Native children to European cultures and knowledges, yet, as racist structures go, never letting them believe that they were white—no matter how hard they studied to be white, they would never be good enough by white standards, a colonial justification for the conditions of poverty, health issues, death, and “under-education” in many Indigenous reservations and communities (Kozol, 1991; Mays & Whalen, 2019). The history of boarding schools involved separating Native children from their families at an early age and exposing them to harsh conditions, where children even died of the illnesses rampant and untreated at these schools (Mays & Whalen, 2019). The tradition of Indian schools is still present today with grossly under-resourced

reservation schools and boarding schools often the only option for Native children.

Colonization, oppression, and suppression of Black children in school follows in the tradition of dehumanizing Indigenous people and dismantling Indigenous communities. Through exclusion, segregation, then the dismantling of Black schools to incorporate Black students into ghettoized schools which conduct a school to prison pipeline, Black children are under constant attack in colonizing schools (Givens, 2021; King, 2019; Love, 2019). Tsianina Lomawaima and Teresa McCarty (2006), summarize: “For American Indians, African Americans, immigrants, and others, schooling has been an engine of standardization, not of parental choice and control, as powerful interests within the dominant society endeavored to fit diverse Americans for their assigned places within established economic and social hierarchies” (p. 5). Schooling of racialized-colonial communities has been intentional and effective at dismantling communities at the heart of the organizational potential, in the education of their young.

The Problem with Schools & the Land

In this study, we also focus on the devastation of the more-than-human living ecosystems whose voices coloniality has taught us do not exist (Blenkinsop et al, 2017). Blenkinsop, Affifi, Piersol, & Danann Sitka-Sage (2017), through the examination of colonization framed by Memmi (1957) in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, extend this argument of colonization by way of education beyond the human, social realm of injustice and apply it to what Meyerhoff and Thompsett (2017) call the “more-than-human” realm—the natural

ecosystems and habits we are a part of. Indigenous and racialized-colonized communities struggle to maintain their kinship relationships with land under colonial structures. Smith, Tuck, and Yang (2019) describe this as they ask, “How can we love and build right relation with profoundly polluted water, water that we are entangled in harming through the infrastructures and systems we have to live through (sewers, garbage, industrialism)?” (p.3).

Eco-critical, sustainability, and many place-based thinkers (Capra & Luisi, 2017; Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2015; Gruenewald, 2008; Miller, 1991) recognize the dangerous role colonial *school systems* play in the devastation of our earth’s ecosystem with its natural resources and habitats, in educating entire populations to be ignorant of the weight of human carelessness against the ability of our planet to thrive. In contrast to the holistic, interconnected, cooperative, and egalitarian world-view necessary to maintain biodiversity and a thriving ecology (such as that of the Indigenous paradigm), the neo-liberal school system is instead anthropocentric, yet non-humanistic, mechanistic, aggressive, authoritarian, and centrally controlled (Miller, 1991).

It is within this context that decolonizing scholar-educators *with communities* are called to the task of finding healthier alternatives for the living and learning of all, but especially for the ones who are presently, and historically have been, the most under attack. It is important here to note that this work cannot be undertaken by scholars and educators, as outsiders to grassroots communities alone. To do so would be colonial. Smith, Tuck, and Yang (2019) tell us that: “there is no decolonization without Indigenous presence on Indigenous land and waters”

(p.1). Dei (2008), Goodyear-Ka ōpua (2013), Lomawaima and McCarty (2006), among other decolonizing scholars, remind us that Indigenous communities have been grappling with ways to educate their own children (withstanding and resisting colonial contexts) from the beginning of the oppressive history of colonizing schools. Not only so, but since time immemorial, Indigenous and ancient cultures have successfully educated their young in their own ways, predating colonial conceptions of schooling (Dei, 2008). Hence, any moves towards decolonizing learning spaces must be grown out of the communities to which the children belong, with their places and cultures, centered on cultural authenticity, self-determination, and dismantling capitalist settler-colonial structures.

The Need for Authentic Learning Places

While the criticisms of colonial schooling are abundant and long-standing, “Giroux (2001) notes, however, socialist critiques of education often fail to propose such alternatives, in spite of their compelling analyses of the myriad problems with education systems in capitalist societies” (as cited in Romero, 2019, p. 4). The controversy of school-choice, standardization, and state-mandated reform, further muddies the waters of transforming problematic school structures. Whereas critical scholars tend to focus on reform of public institutions, centering on concerns of access for those who have been most historically denied resources, literature on anarchist pedagogies emerge from a theoretical stance which denounces the need to rely on or exist within any institutions of state (Rouhani, 2012), thus bringing forth a do-it-yourself enthusiasm for innovation that has taken root within some communities of mavericks

(Haworth & Elmore, 2018). Throughout colonial history, “alternative” ways of education have emerged from the grassroots and margins (Prakash & Esteva, 2008; Smith, 2012) all over the world, some becoming beacons of possibility for other movements to follow. Nevertheless, questions about access and for whom these alternatives are created remain crucial to this conversation.

There has been a rich history of alternative learning places emerging at the grassroots, for and by the communities who have been historically the most excluded from access to alternatives, including the Highlander school in Tennessee born out of the civil rights movement, the Freedom community schools created by the Black Panther movement, and the Escuela Moderna in Spain in the early 1900’s created by anarchist thinker Francisco Ferrer (Haworth & Elmore, 2018). Anarchist schools were a notable movement, such as those that emerged in England at the turn of the century as a response to what many working-class and immigrant families felt like was an over-controlling nation state. However, these schools struggled to sustain themselves into a wider community project or to have any significant effect on social structures (Thomas, 2004). The obstacle remained to create viable alternatives that would trigger a shift in our current social paradigm away from what Illich (2000) referred to as a dependence on traditional schools—a shift that holistic and systems thinking scholars would agree is necessary for sustainable change and must be an emergence of interconnected consciousness for the good of the collective whole (Capra & Luisi, 2018; Meadows, 2008; Miller, 1991) and that decolonizing and critical scholars would argue must help communities to escape

settler-colonialism and capitalist structures (Illich, 2000; McLaren, 2015).

Anarchist (Suissa, 2006), holistic (Miller, 1991), critical educators (Illich, 2000), systems thinkers (Capra & Luisi, 2015) and decolonial scholars (Prakash & Esteva, 2008) alike, believed in the inherent nature of humans to learn spontaneously as an inextricable function of living and being an interconnected part of their environment. Romero (2018), who presented critical unschooling as an alternative, states that “an autonomous and learner-centered approach to education...turns the world into a classroom and divorces education from the colonality of its underlying power structures” (Romero, 2018, p. 3), thus the learner can be engaged in education at any time or place. Alternatives for authentic learning, then, must allow for the autonomy of the learner to follow her own curiosity as it interacts with her environment, both social and natural (Mercogliano, 2016; Miller, 1991). Whereas authoritarianism of colonial schooling conditions children to ignore their natural instincts to imagine, create, and explore, authentic learning alternatives foster the co-construction and meaning making that happens spontaneously when children are given a nurturing environment to explore, wonder, dialogue, and experiment (Haworth & Elmore, 2018, Mercogliano, 2016; Miller, 1991).

Romero (2018) conceptualizes this alternative learning as that which “centers the voices of the most vulnerable and historically marginalized communities, that educates *by, for, and through* human rights in a learner-centered fashion that encourages students to create knowledge that affirms their interests, ignites their passions, and addresses their most pressing concerns” (p.13-14).

Yet, in the pluriverse of epistemologies and histories, we must also engage in the one in which we do not define our ways of being and learning *in relation to* our oppressors, as Said (1979) argues. This is not to deny history or ignore that which we fear. Rather, it is an exercise of anti-colonial praxis (Shajahan, 2005) that brings us out of linear time and allows us to connect with the spiritual, pluralistic web of space-time realities, in which coloniality not only does not exist, but also makes no sense. While we as humans straddle the planes of the linear and nonlinear, we then must choose our modalities wisely. It is useful, for now, to speak of alternatives that herald the shifting of paradigms away from coloniality, whose existence not only resist colonial structures but also simultaneously negate being defined in terms related to colonialism, moving towards authenticity in liberation.

George Sefa Dei (2016) writing as an Indigenous scholar-educator in a diasporic context for African and diverse communities in Toronto offers that, “If we want to drastically change the colonial foundations of our academies, then we should rename and reimagine the academy altogether” (p.293). Dei (2016) suggests that these re-imaginings of the academy, which includes education at all levels, should involve a “an intentional, practical engagement with Indigenous knowledges from a place that views these epistemologies as critical in their own right...this grounding process speaks to the centrality of claiming and reclaiming Indigenous ways of knowing and living in the decolonization process” (p. 294). Dei’s call to communities to rename and reimagine the academy altogether from a place situated in Indigenous knowledge and decolonizing praxis is resonant with the questions that brought me to this journey.

Place & Learning

Place and learning are connected, so our discussion of learning brings us to examine the meaning and role of place. For Indigenous people, there is no learning without place as Land is the first teacher (Aluli-Meyer, 2008; McCoy, Tuck, & MacKenzie, 2016; Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2019). Many ancient cosmologies reflect inseparable connections to land in their language and ways of life. For the Hakka people, as rice has historically been our sustenance, we have four different words for rice to indicate the various stages of the plant's life and cycle of harvest. Personification of natural elements also evinces an ontology that is counter to western anthropocentric worldview. In the Hakka language (as was passed down to me) we refer to "sunrise" and "sunset" as "the sun climbing the mountains" and "the sun going down the mountains", the mountains also being our location of identity. This way of seeing the world as a culture connected more closely to the land as Hakka people is especially apparent when juxtaposed to the Mandarin terms for sunrise and sunset which are translated much more closely to "sun-out" and "sun-down". For Indigenous and land-based cultures, learning from-with the land is not an elective course. It fully embodies and informs how to live and know on this earth.

Greenwood (2009) contends, "places are pedagogical both because their contexts shape our experiences of learning and becoming, and because our experiences of learning in turn contribute to place-making, place-changing, and place-leaving." (p. 1). Aluli-Meyer (2008) writes that "land is more than a physical place. It is an idea that engages knowledge and

contextualizes knowing” (p. 219). Land, personified as our mother, is the one *from* whom we learn best (Aluli-Meyer, 2008). Johnson (2010) conceptualizes place in two ways: “place as a way of understanding, knowing and learning about the world; and second, as the embodied location of everyday struggle for meaning; political, cultural and economic” (p. 830). The first conception of place echoes that of Greenwood and Meyer. The second lends itself to Romero’s (2018) argument in which places of education function “as a site of postcolonial protest in which historically minoritized, racialized, and marginalized people are able to critique the oppressive systems under which they exist and imagine more just and humane realities” (p. 4).

As Indigenous epistemologies have continuously called us to acknowledge land as the source of our knowing, and as decolonizing educator-scholars are now tasked with overturning the globalizing and distorting effects of colonial schooling, we return to a consciousness of place in learning to counter the placelessness of colonial globalization. Schools, both situated in space and functioning as places of meaning-making and of construction of ideologies, must attend to place.

Current Alternatives & The Problem of White Spaces

It is important to note that within the empirical research discourse on current holistic education as an alternative to traditional colonial schooling, a wide spectrum of pedagogy has emerged with varying emphasis on the role of education in fostering radical empathy and activism. For critical scholars (i.e., Freire, 1970; McLaren, 2015), authentic learning, as a development of critical consciousness, must lead learners to trouble existing oppressive

systems, claiming their agency in greater social transformation. Sustainable systems and place-based thinkers extend this consciousness and ethical responsibility into the more-than-human realm of all living ecosystems (i.e., Capra & Luisi, 2018; Gruenewald, 2003; Meadows, 2008).

However, we can observe a growing phenomenon of alternative schools (including many which go by the names of free, open, democratic, holistic, progressive, and some even place-based) which foster student-led learning, play, creativity, and democratic social meaning-making, yet which do not necessarily emphasize the development of a critical consciousness or have any agendas to resist some of the sinister implications of neo-liberal schooling that led us to the discussion of alternatives for education^[1]. Furthermore, these examples of alternative education, while they may go by the term “place-based” in that they encourage student play-time outdoors, do not seem to emphasize an eco-consciousness that would foster the exploration of interconnected living systems and implications for sustainability as an emergent ethical practice through learning, much less an acknowledgement of Indigenous originality in connection to land and, thus, guiding of our understanding in what it means to be authentically place-based and positioned within a decolonizing agenda.

In surveying the literature, I was most disappointed in the lack of intentionality from most of the dominant voices in the field of alternative or innovative schools, to acknowledge issues of access and creation of alternative schools for the very populations which colonial

¹ The literature which informs this finding was not cited in this literature review; it is composed of the articles and books which were removed from this study precisely because they lacked mention to any praxis that would have implications for marginalized communities.

schooling systems have taken the most from—Indigenous, Black, and marginalized children. Overall, initial searches to answer the question: “what educational alternatives to traditional schools exist and what do we know about them?” brought me again and again to a picture of democratic, free schools created by nature-loving, art-loving, play-loving educators, offering children the opportunity to grow up unhindered by the failures and rigidity of traditional schools—as long as they are white and can afford private school tuition and the demands of parent involvement, which many marginalized families are not privileged to. However, these initial searches did provide a useful boundary for my inquiry and several key volumes of literature compiled empirical examples to contour the terrain of existing alternatives in education. I will summarize these examples for context before revisiting the driving questions of my research as it pertains to communities of Indigenous and racialized others.

In 1991, Ron Miller’s book *New Directions in Education: Selections from Holistic Education Review* compiled both theoretical frameworks and empirical reports, giving a hopeful narrative about the possibilities in holistic, alternative education. The authors of this book wrote in such a way that demonstrated a cohesive viewpoint in the functionality of educational alternatives to serve a spectrum of needs, including ecological and social justice. This book includes an account of Black and white teacher dialogue around improving learning conditions for students of color, a chapter acknowledging the role of Indigenous knowledge as the forebearer for place-based learning, and an essay on bilingual education, alongside chapters which present the Waldorf approach and Montessori schools as noteworthy examples of the emerging alternative

education of that time (Miller, 1991).

Though Waldorf and Montessori have endured as well-known names in school-choice discourse, the reality of either of those schools as an accessible option of authentic learning for *all* children has not translated into the present day. Furthermore, the conversations presented in the book about race, bilingual education, and acknowledgement of Indigenous origins in land and land-based knowledge have found a comfortable home *within* the intuition of traditional schooling, albeit at the heart of conversations around school reform. Unfortunately, nearly 30 years later, we still have not experienced the paradigmatic shift in educational systems that Miller (1991) heralded when he wrote “chances are that by the year 2000 we will have a vastly different system for educating our children” (p. 36), indicating that the holistic learning paradigm would have by now emerged as the new status quo. I theorize the delay in paradigm shift is due in large part to the power of the state-mandated policies of No Child Left Behind and even the subsequent movements towards common-core standards and charter-dominated school choice. Both movements entrench schools in a top-down, generalized agenda, effectively snuffing out teacher creativity, local autonomy, place-based identities, and community difference (Schneidewind & Sapon-Shevin, 2012)—all necessary factors for authentic learning alternatives to emerge.

In 2016, Chris Mercogliano’s *How to Grow a School Starting and Sustaining Schools that Work* (distributed by the Alternative Education Resource Organization) harkened to the anarchist credo of do-it-yourself and suggested the organic ability of any community to grow a “good

school". The author defines a good school in terms that are familiar to Miller's (1991) summary of holistic education, including freedom for the students to be curious, co-create knowledge, not be restricted by age or time barriers, allows the student to connect to both nature and community, and to make choices in a democratic fashion about her own learning (Mercogliano, 2016). The book includes an overview of 14 existing alternative schools that fall much in line with the Waldorf and Montessori spectrum of education. Notably, the entire book makes no mention of cultural or racial diversity, of Indigenous epistemologies, of decolonization, of marginalized students, nor even any hint to the unjust context in which the dichotomy of good school/ bad school even exists. For any scholar-educators approaching this piece of literature for direction in new and alternative schooling, they would find no clear direction in taking critical action towards the creation or protection of alternative, authentic educational systems for the bringing forth of social and ecological justice.

Robert Haworth and John Elmore (2017) move the boundary of documentation on existing educational alternatives a little closer to the core values of our search in their book *Out of the Ruins: The Emergence of Radical Informal Learning Spaces*. Drawing from critical pedagogy, systems thinking, and anarchist methodologies, the authors present a voice in the discourse on alternative education that reminds the audience of the inherently radical, and thus critical, positioning of alternative educational models against the repressive neo-liberal agenda. The empirical grounds from which information is surfaced are places such as the anarchist free schools in Toronto, the Space Project, and the Really Open University. Though this anthology

highlights the potential for such radical informal learning spaces born out of autonomous community struggle to systematically crack capitalism and bring about a paradigmatic shift away from colonization (Haworth & Elmore, 2017), which would implicate better conditions for marginalized communities, the authors within this book do not directly foreground the struggles by and for Indigenous and non-Indigenous others. Discussion about connecting learning to place, land, and ecology is also absent from this book. Instead, the perspective is focused largely on political-economic reform.

Maija Salokangas and Mel Ainscow (2018) write about what they call a “radical policy trend that is gaining momentum at a remarkable pace around the world” (p. xv) in *Inside the Autonomous School*. The authors (2018) write: “As countries throughout the world seek to improve their national education systems there is an increasing emphasis on the idea of school autonomy” (p. 1). Salokangas and Ainscow’s discussion of “autonomous schools” in a global context includes the charter school movement in the U.S., English academies, and Australian public schools. As such, they note that they are implicating a very narrow sense of the word “autonomous” as it is applied to education. The authors also note that “autonomous” is defined in terms of relativity, given that a public school can never be fully autonomous from the state it serves. (This recognition is important and helps to make my case that the general representation of autonomous schools in recent literature still lend themselves to a colonizer’s point of view.) This book details a longitudinal case study on one autonomous school in England located in an urban, middle-class, homogeneously white-european community. The authors

findings, both from this case study and from their survey of other similar contexts, suggest that autonomous schools struggle with the following tensions: Free market approaches v.s. educational equity, innovation vs. the nature of work in schools, and autonomy vs. control. The authors conclude that, “Due to the tensions that are at the core of the autonomous school movement, it has suffered from a lack of clarity of purpose and, as a result, has struggled in delivering its ambitious promises” (p. 139). The authors’ perception of autonomous schools is still largely measured by notions of successful dominant, colonizing education. This account implies that the sole motivation for educating “autonomously” is to afford more innovative practices, innovation here regarded much in the same way that “progress” and “development” have been understood within colonial ideologies.

From this outskirts on the terrain of educational alternatives, I revisited the purpose of our search and asked again, “Whose voices and what perspectives are missing?” and “Where can we find them?” If the voices of Indigenous, Black, and racialized Others are not present in the prevailing literature on emerging models of alternative education, does this mean that this version of education, though presented as new and radical, is still in fact a white space, as Milne (2016) describes? Were decolonial scholar-educators intentionally absent from this discourse by their own accord? Or were they excluded and forgotten here by white scholars (again)? If so, where could I reconnect with present decolonizing voices, and did they have anything to say about the creation and protection of alternative, authentic learning places as possibilities of escaping mandated colonizing schooling? Surely, there is some way that self-determination in

education allows our bodies as colonized subjects, in the process of reclaiming cultural identity, to exist and learn outside of colonizing schools. Surely, we do not only have to do this work only from within the institution. Or am I wrong?

Learning as Self-determination: Indigenous Conceptions of Education

Indigenous scholar, Margaret Kovach (2009) problem-poses: “There has been a crisis in Indigenous educational and child welfare policy (among other sites) in this country. Why? Because the research that influences policy and shapes practices that impact Indigenous communities emerges from Western, not Indigenous, knowledges or forms of inquiry (Location 213). Kupferman (2018) metaphorizes colonizing schooling as the administering of amnesia. With colonizing structures effectively erasing and diminishing Indigenous voices at all levels of education, the policies that establish and protect schools, curriculum, and teaching practices continue to perpetuate coloniality rather than Indigenous realities (and those of non-western Others).

Decolonizing, then, is the (re)membering of what has always been knowledge. And knowledge has always been the goal. Decolonizing in education is happening both from within existing institutions and from without. Hundle (2019) writes of a decolonizing approach to subvert from within colonizing intuitions and make visible that which has been historically erased...to make spaces “where plurality and difference can flourish with joy” (Hundle, 2019, p. 16). Pidgeon, Munoz, Kirkness, and Archibald (2013), four Indigenous woman scholars write to document the development and use of the Indian Control of Indian Education (1972) policy in

how it was employed in both existing school spaces as well as in the imagining of new spaces and institutions solely dedicated to educating of Canadian Indigenous children through Indigenous-specific educational programs. This piece represents to me a place of in-betweenness, in which Indigenous autonomy is foregrounded, yet the implicit context for education seems to be still preparation for the dominant settler-colonial society.

Bell (2013) presents a study also emerging from work based in the Indian Control of Indian Education policy of 1972, centered on the creation of an Anishinaabe culture-based school, created to meet the needs of Anishinaabe children through a pedagogy that directly reflects Anishinaabe epistemology and identities. The author (2013) posits that the existence of the school and the culturally responsive, Elder-led research conducted within the school serve as “a model for other off-base Anishinaabe communities to create culturally-based educational spaces for their children by “just doing it” (p. 1). Here, self-reliance and resourcefulness are key elements to the self-determination of an Indigenous community as they take the educating of their children into their own hands by creating a culturally based educational space. The author acknowledged the failure of state schools to meet the needs of Indigenous schools and presented an Indigenous-constructed educational space as a model from which (the author hoped) all Indigenous communities could take inspiration (Bell, 2012).

Milne (2016) writes of “coloring in white spaces” as a metaphor for reclaiming Indigenous autonomy in Maori lands, to educate within places which have been historically colonized and dominated by white settlers. Kia Aroha, a learning place born out of Maori and

Pasifika community struggle, exists as an alternative to the colonizers school system, in which a plurality of Indigenous identities and epistemologies compose the sovereign pillars of learning from which its students construct and preserve culturally relevant knowledge.

Dei, in 2006, wrote a proposal for Black-focused schools, citing the failure of public-school systems to educate children of color, and calling for “‘revised schooling’ in the form of an African-centered/ Black-focused school” (p. 27) to emerge from Black and African communities in Toronto. In 2008, Nicole Neverson (2014) writes to document the approval of public funding for what would be the Toronto Africentric Alternative School, “galvanized by a grassroots petition for the establishment of the school” (p. 1851). This movement faced immediate media backlash and resistance from writers of a dominant ideology, stating that having an ethno-centered school would create racial tension in their city (Neverson, 2014). The Toronto Africentric Alternative School was established successfully in 2009 as the first stand alone, culture-based, public elementary school in the city (Howard & James, 2019). Phillip Howard and Carl James (2019) conducted a 3-year study to consider what the aspirations of the teachers, students, parents, and stakeholders in the school may have been and how they shaped the formation of the school. The researchers found:

“(1) they cooperate with each other, parents, and community to establish a familial environment for all school stakeholders; (2) they endeavour to establish classrooms that affirm students’ lived and political Blackness, that value the diverse ways in which Blackness is lived, and that help students to challenge oppressive practices among

themselves; and (3) they persevere through sometimes challenging conditions created by historical and ongoing educational injustice, endeavouring to preserve the dignity of all members of the school community” (p. 313)

This study is foundational for my work, both in the authors engaged in culturally responsive methodologies, “participating in the life of the school” (p. 320), but also because of the documentation of the creation of an alternative, culture-based school, grown from within a diverse, yet historically marginalized and racialized, community, grounded in Indigenous knowledges, even in an urban place.

In returning to the river of decolonial scholarship, I was brought back to the notions and realities of both self-determination and place-basedness inherently present in Indigeneity, even if it was in the form of reclaiming spaces and places rather than direct education in ecology and relationships with Land. I found threads and examples of intersection in the notions of autonomous, alternative learning spaces, Indigenous and culturally responsive pedagogy, and the pedagogy of place and sustainability, weaving and appearing in different writings.

Learning & the Land: The Role of Education in the Climate Crisis

Scholars and educators from many directions are converging in conversation around how to educate in the context of a climate crisis and an undeniable urgency to reverse the damage of industrialization on our earth and waters. Recently, climate issues have drawn scholars from the natural sciences, social sciences, education, policy, and economics into a discourse about our collective future. There is a resounding recognition from many sustainable

systems, place-based, and decolonizing writers that the authentic roots of knowledge base for understanding the human-nature relationship are grown out of Indigenous epistemologies (i.e., Greenwood, 2008; Johnson, 2010; Root, 2010). “Research has suggested that the view of humans as part of the interconnected earth and living in harmony with the natural world is the worldview of many Indigenous people” (Glasson et al, 2006, p. 1). Thus, any attempt at anti-colonial, eco-critical praxis must find its way through Indigenous knowledge (Root, 2010). If we are those who are summoned to this journey but are not Indigenous, we must be especially mindful of the anti-colonial practice that Blenkinsop, Affifi, Piersol, & Danann Sitka-Sage (2017) call “shut up and listen”; that is, to pause and listen carefully to Indigenous voice before theorizing any solutions to the havoc created by colonial domination over our natural world.

Root (2010) echoes this sentiment toward non-Indigenous scholar-educators called to work in the places in which anti-colonial and place-based education converge. Reflecting through her own personal process as a white environmental educator, she recognizes the need to foreground Indigenous knowledge, and decolonize her own mind and relationship to the land. While much of decolonizing discourse is by and for Indigenous people, it is critical that white people and non-Indigenous others find their own diverse paths towards decolonization, in a way that imagines a new future for Indigenous, grassroots, and more-than-human communities (Goodyear-Ka ōpua, 2019; Meyerhoff & Thompsett, 2017). This should be a matter of interrogating self, being reflective and reflexive, and listening and honoring Indigenous epistemology, without co-opting or burdening Indigenous communities with a neediness to

receive instruction, time, or resources directly from them (Root, 2010). A part of the decolonizing process for non-Indigenous people should lead them to resist the monolithic understanding of culture even as it pertains to whiteness, and begin to see difference and culture in European heritages, including healthier, pre-colonial relationships to land (Root, 2010).

Meyerhoff and Thompsett (2017) document the existence of the Free Universities which: “are open to anyone and free to attend, avoid state affiliation, do not offer accreditation, gather in physical spaces (i.e., offline); and include a goal of liberation, however defined” (p. 2). The authors claim that this model of education weaves together “oppositional” elements that critique traditional forms of educational institutions, analyzed in relation to coloniality, with “propositional” elements that re-imagine education to bring forth a better world (p. 2 & 4). Free universities are seen as potential accomplices in decolonization. This article gives hope to allyship or accompliceship for non-Indigenous teacher-learners who wish to collectively and more-than-humanly decolonize, through “the continual, collective labor of communicating, relating, and studying with Indigenous peoples and the settlers who aspire to act as accomplices—toward the ends of breaking down colonial-capitalist institutions, reclaiming land for Indigenous peoples, and strengthening resurgences of Indigenous ways of life” (p. 11).

I located a handful of other studies (i.e., Cook, 2015; Hlalele, 2019; Glasson, Frykholm, Mhango, and Phiri, 2006) which document research done in Kenya, South Africa, and Malawi, respectively, in which decolonizing methodologies tied to land and ecology were implemented

in traditional, colonizing schools with implications that Indigenous knowledges play a significant role in informing the ecological knowledge and actions toward sustainability in each community, oftentimes within existing schools and institutions.

Education Emerging from Community & Place: Authenticity, Indigeneity, & Land

Kate McCoy, Eve Tuck, and Marcia MacKenzie (2016) edited *Land education: Rethinking pedagogies of place from Indigenous, postcolonial, and decolonizing perspectives* to draw together essays by Indigenous and non-Indigenous decolonizing scholars as they take on a land-based approach to place-based education. Authors cover a range of contexts for this land/place-based pedagogy to emerge from K-12 education, post-secondary education, and community-based education. The perspectives from this volume, encompassing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous paths to decolonizing land-based work, speak to the necessity of all communities to engage deeply in pedagogy that addresses colonialism, settler colonialism, and colonial effects on land and the natural environment. These narratives emerge from settings that range from urban to rural and include accounts from Australia, Hawaii, Alaska, the U.S. mainland, Canada, and Brazil.

Di-Mauro and Carroll (2016) apply this decolonizing lens to surface the history of the chattel slave and to argue for the educating of black children in the US with an African-centered environmental education curricula. Paperson (2016) draws awareness to the plight of colonialism in urban communities and how “ghetto colonialism” intersects with land justice, writing: “First, ghetto colonialism is a specialization of settler colonialism. Second, land justice

requires decolonization, not just environmental justice” (p. 115). Manulani Auli-Meyer (2016), positioned as a Native Hawaiian scholar, argues that land education also involves food sovereignty, narrating the ways in which Native Hawaiians sustained an entire civilization with their relationship with land and cultivating the growth of kalo (taro) in their sustainable island ecosystem. Decolonizing and Land-based praxis, then, necessarily involves Indigenous and colonized communities reclaiming land to produce their own food, and subsequently the sustaining of their community's health and nourishment. Sato, Silva, and Jaber (2016) writing from Brazil, narrate the use of the social maps as a way of communities collectively interrogating “group identities, self-narratives, and social frames” (p.102) as a way of informing public policy.

Land education: Rethinking pedagogies of place from Indigenous, postcolonial, and decolonizing perspectives shows us that decolonizing education is land education is Indigenous education. Through these various accounts, we see that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities alike can grapple with the work of undoing settler colonialism in their own places. While the examples in this volume do not specifically address the notion of land-based decolonizing education happening in an alternative-autonomous setting *for children*, they do help us imagine the ways these pedagogies may emerge from a variety of educational settings as a significant springboard for decolonizing work.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eve Tuck, and K. Wayne Yang (2019) have compiled a collection of works from Indigenous scholars in *Indigenous & Decolonizing Studies in Education*. As such, this

volume is a conversation of Indigenous voices calling to other Indigenous communities. In this volume, we see the flow of recent Indigenous scholarship moving even emphatically towards the notion that decolonizing, land-based education is necessary, and are not best suited to be conducted within colonizing institutions but rather in Indigenous places and communities (Mays & Whalen, 2019; Rorick, 2019). The authors in this volume write from a variety of places including education in non-school formats (Claxton & France, 2019; Rorick, 2019), in university-level formats (Batz, 2019; McBreen, 2019; Newberry & Trujillo, 2019) and in schools for children (Mays & Whalen, 2019).

Mays & Whalen (2019) narrate a pair of important accounts of Indigenous women who endeavored to make Indigenous-centered schools for children. One of these women, Esther Mays, worked in the 1980's-90's to extend a culture-based Saturday school in Detroit into a full school, welcoming all children in the community including non-Indigenous children, to be educated in Indigenous pedagogies. The school was a success for over a decade before the district removed Mays as principal citing nepotism for drawing from within her own family, as highly qualified Indigenous educators, to fill teaching positions (Mays & Whalen, 2019). This narrative illustrates the arduous task for Indigenous people of obtaining pedagogical autonomy from within a state system. However, this narrative also illustrates the radical possibilities and tenacity of Indigenous communities to create educational spaces for their own children when the ones given to them do not work for them. In this story, we also see how this native community conceptualized education of their own children alongside non-native children.

Goodyear-Ka ōpua (2019), writing from Hawaii, also writes to wonder what dialogues between Natives and settlers might look like around an agenda of Indigenous sovereignty which foregrounds Indigenous self-determination, leadership, and expertise. Goodyear-Ka ōpua writes from a context that remembers the beautiful condition of Indigenous life predating colonization, a notion that Aluli-Meyer (2016) and Claxton & France (2019) also narrate in which Indigenous people lived sustainably, peacefully, and in prosperity. Goodyear-Ka ōpua (2019) draws from the Native Hawaiian relationship with the ocean to seek a fluidity that can help them to grapple with the current conditions of colonization, including the destruction of natural habitats and the over-militarization of the ocean which Native Oceanic peoples regard to be their home.

Other writers in this volume also evince Indigenous connection to nature and elements of nature as their teachers. John (2019) writes of learning from her horses on the Navajo reservation. Rorick (2019) narrates being called to study her native language by a crab on the beach. These authors remind us that Indigenous education, language, and cosmologies are inextricable from relationship to Land (Batz, 2019; Calxton & France, 2019; Munoz, 2019; Newberry & Trujillo, 2019; & Styres, 2019). Styres (2019) who writes on “Literacies of the Land ” tells us that “Indigeneity and working within Indigenous contexts is first and foremost about reciprocity and relationships” (p. 24). For Indigenous people, Land (with a capital L) is their first teacher. Styres (2019) writes:

“For those who want to live in deeply sacred and intimate relationship to Land must

understand that it first and foremost requires a respectful and consistent acknowledgment of whose traditional lands we are on, a commitment to journeying—a seeking out and coming to an understanding of the stories and knowledges embedded in those lands, a conscious choosing to live in intimate, sacred, and storied relationships with those lands and not the least of which is an acknowledgment of the ways one is implicated in the networks and relations of power that comprise the tangled colonial history of the lands one is upon” (p. 29).

Caring for the Land is not only an Indigenous issue. Rather, for all of us who live on earth, we have an inherent responsibility to the earth and all those who inhabit it to find better ways of coming into relationship with one another and with the Land. However, our journeys towards this relationship with Land cannot be outside of our acknowledgment of the various Indigenous stories that make up the earth’s history. With such a deep listening, acknowledgement, and moving together with, we begin to conceive of possibilities of educating, within our own communities and places, and in dialogue with one another, towards a decolonized, sustainable, and Indigenous future.

As I have sought through the literature to find a clear example of the convergence of these three streams: decolonizing, place/land-based, and alternative-autonomous learning places for children, I was gifted by a teacher from Hālau Kū Māna (my co-storyer, Trevor) with *The Seeds we Planted* by Noelani Goodyear-Ka ʻōpua (2013). It is the only example of literature I have read, to date, which documents the creation of an existing alternative-autonomous school

for children with the purpose of enacting both Indigenous self-determination (and thus decolonizing pedagogy) and an explicit agenda to educate towards stewardship of the land. Goodyear-Ka'ōpua (2013) narrates an account of her community's journey to grow a culture-based, a'ina-based school in Oahu, Hawaii, beginning in 1998. In Hālau Kū Māna we find a public charter school born out of the Indigenous struggle for self-determination to resist the colonizing, capitalist occupation of Native Hawaiian lands. Grown from families, community members, and leaders, Hālau Kū Māna serves local children as a learning place where they may be immersed in Indigenous language and epistemologies, which include a connection to a'ina, or land, as the foundation of knowing and being. In this account we see the radical, transformative potential in Indigenous self-determination to create and sustain a learning place, autonomous in curriculum and organization and grounded in decolonizing and place-based pedagogy.

Summary

In considering the literature with which I have engaged, I have identified some open spaces for dialogue: (1) Indigenous and anti-colonial voices are still noticeably diminished in the discourse around alternative schooling. Yet as decolonial literature (i.e., McCoy, Tuck, & MacKenzie, 2016; Prakash & Esteva, 2008; Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2019) would suggest, Indigenous and colonized communities would have the greatest opportunity to thrive in living and learning once they have escaped colonial schooling, necessitating alternatives, to use the phrase dialectically, for communities of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Others. (2)

Decolonizing literature and place-based literature (i.e. Aluli-Meyer, 2008; Johnson, 2010; McCoy, Tuck, & MacKenzie, 2016; Smith, Tuck & Wayne, 2019) have a recursive relationship that brings learning back to interconnection to land and living systems and results in education towards stewardship of the land, resonating with the call put forth by eco-conscious and sustainable systems thinkers (i.e. Capra & Luisi, 2018; Gruenewald, 2008). (3) A smaller but still significant narrative in the literature emerges through the voices of scholars such as Milne (2006) and Bell (2016) which document the radical possibility of autonomous (thus, alternative) learning places born out of Indigenous, anti-colonial struggle for self-determination and reclamation of space in a way that transcends the “white spaces” of colonial intuitions. Goodyear-Ka'ōpua (2013) gives us an example of a healthy Indigenous grown, land-based, decolonizing alternative-autonomous learning place.

As I engaged with literature which connected the ideas of Indigeneity/decolonization with place-based/eco-consciousness, I found myself imagining stories of many more anti-colonial and land-conscious pedagogies actualized in learning places outside of colonizing school systems. It is within this dialogue of possibility, that I aim to further listen and learn, with the intention of allowing such stories of possibility to be told and told again. For with telling of possibility, come the dreams in the hearts of revolutionaries, to act and make our world(s) better.

Chapter 4–Methodology: Guides for the Way

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the methodological traditions that guide each phase of this research process. By adhering to methodologies which align with my theoretical framework, I aim to conduct research that honors the communities who inform my study, which serves as an example of decolonizing research, and authentically informs or supports future practices in anti-colonial and critical pedagogy. This chapter will first present the problems with traditional research and discuss an alternative paradigm of research as reclamation work. Next, I will survey the fields of methodology from which I draw in the construction of this study which I have grouped into the following t: (1) Indigenous, Decolonizing, and Culturally Responsive Methodologies and (2) Narrative, Storywork, Portraiture, and Critical Autoethnography. This chapter offers the steps taken to consider ethical procedures and ensure trustworthiness. Finally, this chapter considers the risk & benefits of participation in this study and discusses considerations of trustworthiness in the study.

While this chapter documents the research design as it emerges from a methodological framework, Chapter 5- Research Steps will detail the practical steps taken to conduct the research study, including data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings and discussion. Woven between Chapters 4 and 5 are two portrait chapters that introduce you to my co-storyers and their school communities and grounds this study within the contexts of our identities, positionalities, and our relationships to our communities, land, contexts, and one another.

Within the first portrait chapter, I have also included my critical autoethnographic story as a lens (as a researcher positionality which is commonly found within methodology chapters of qualitative research). I consider all 4 of these chapters (Chapter 4-Methodology, Portrait I-To Whom the Story Belongs, Chapter 5- Research Steps, and Portrait II- Where the Story Takes Place) as integral pieces to the methodological framework of this study.

The Problem with Traditional Research

Research is a world constructed by those who took instead of asked, who charged instead of waited, and who branded instead of invoked; yet research also represents a place of hope and reclamation. Linda Tuhuiwai Smith (2012) “identifies research as a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other” (location 254), and reminds us that historically, “the objects of research do not have a voice and do not contribute to research or science” (location 1423). For research to become a decolonizing force, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers must have clarity on their own agency to dismantle colonial hegemony and an ethical framework to guide all research activity for the protection of all vulnerable communities (Barryman, SooHoo, & Nevin, 2013; Smith, 2012; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2008).

Othering has affected not only Indigenous and racialized-colonized communities along racial or ethnic identifiers, but also along other strands of identities: gender, language, sexual orientation, ability, social status, among others. This recognition of the pervasiveness of othering and colonizing in research is more relevant than ever, as we see modern research

continue to fragment, essentialize, and commodify people along demarcations of such identities, or erasing these identities altogether (K. Stockbridge, personal communication, November 7, 2018). Smith writes, “The objects of research do not have a voice and do not contribute to research or science” (2012, Chapter 3, Establishing the positional superiority of western knowledge, para. 4). Mere Berryman, Suzanne SooHoo, and Ann Nevin (2013) add, “Traditionally, the “right-to-be-studied (or not)” and decisions about how the study would be carried out have not been maintained by the researched community, rather they have been sustained by groups of outsiders who have retained the power to research and to define” (p.1). For many of us who do not belong into the dominant culture, research has either ignored our truths, has re-written our histories, or has stolen and misappropriated our sacred knowledge and intimate truths (C. Evenson, personal communication, November 7, 2018). The result of this type of academic tradition has been the creation and upholding of systems that do not benefit and even do harm to us, the others.

Research as Communion: A Collective Paradigm

To resist the problematic and colonizing customs posed in traditional research, I employ decolonizing and Indigenous practices of collectivism to reclaim research as a mutually beneficial exercise. Instead of thinking of myself as an individual researcher, I conceive of myself as a component of a research-activist nucleus, itself a part of a larger cell (community), organ (humanity), and organism (earth). This nucleus consists of myself and my family along with my teachers and elders who sit on my research committee. Although I recognize that I am

the only one currently obtaining a Ph.D. through this dissertation, I maintain that my work is collective. On the most intimate level, it is a journey for me with my family as we move in reflection towards a deeper knowing of our positions and places. On a more expanded level, this research belongs to the teachers on this dissertation committee whose individual work in academic and social change are the very shoulders on which we now stand, and by whose guidance we conduct each step of this process. Furthermore, this research exists only with the people who invite us into their places and spaces to get to know each other, share knowledge, and create ways for stories to travel.

To embody decolonized research, I make a further shift from the traditional research paradigm: I have sought to push against the compartmentalization and limitation imposed on so many professional and academic women forced to choose one path or the other. Instead, I embody my identities as mother, researcher, educator, and change agent as I carry out this work. As I enter these spaces, I hope the people I form relationships with can also experience me in this embodiment of wholeness and see that I come to them as a critical mother concerned with building and protecting villages of love for the earth and its children.

My research is my offering to all those who have been “othered” like me (Borrero et al, 2012; SooHoo, 2006) and who fight to keep hope alive in their hearts and communities. As we commune with one another through this new paradigm of collective research, we realize that this exercise has always been so much greater than one person or one work. The reason we do research is grounded in our conviction that, as interconnected beings, we can dialogically

construct social change and collective transformation of the places we inhabit.

Research Questions

In a broad sense, my work and living are guided by the question: *What is good for earth and what is good for humanity?* I allow the intentions behind this question to cover all my working and learning. Thus, the purpose of this study is to better understand: *How are decolonizing, place/land-based, and community-grown learning places created and sustained and what stories would they share about their creation and existence?* Additional research questions include: *What theories guide learning and teaching? What epistemologies are embedded in their curriculum and organization? In what ways do these schools benefit their communities, both human and “more-than-human”? Furthermore, how do these school communities remain sustainable and authentic to their visions within the context of dominant settler-state systems?*

To answer these questions, I developed relationships with a teacher/founder at each school site included in the study. This person became the key informant/co-storyer at each site. At their discretion, other folks from within their school communities were invited into our dialogues as participants and informants to this study. The bulk of the data is generated from the conversations and dialogues that took place between the researcher and co-storyers as we collectively explored these research questions in the context of the lived experiences and situational knowledges of the co-storyers along with the observational data I gathered by being and participating in the activities of learning at their schools.

Research Methodologies

The methods for this study were selected with three main intentions: 1) to gather rich, authentic, and empowering data that responds to the research questions on autonomous-alternative schooling, 2) to share the findings of the study in a way that is authentic and beneficial to the participants who informed the findings and 3) to offer discussions and conclusions drawn from the findings in a timely, compelling, and authentic manner as to further inform community work that intersects with this study.

Decolonizing, Indigenous, and Culturally Relevant Methodologies serve as guide and ethical sounding board for the steps conducted in this research beginning with research design and extending through all subsequent steps of research. Narrative traditions including Storywork and Portraiture, along with more common practices of interview and narrative found in qualitative research, serves as the instrument and medium for collecting, analyzing, and presenting data. Finally, as I embed myself relationally with my participants in learning and experiencing the phenomenon that I examine in this study, I employ critical autoethnography to make sense of my experiences and a part of the larger body of data. Together, these form the methodological framework as the guides and tools with which I produce this study.

Decolonizing, Indigenous, and Culturally Relevant Methodologies: Instructor & Lesson

An Indigenous research paradigm has existed for thousands of years and embodies the ways in which Indigenous people have studied the world around them (Wilson, 2008). As such,

Indigenous paradigms are not merely situated within decolonizing contexts, as they include Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies descended from time immemorial (Dei, 2014). However, Indigenous research today is also decolonizing in that that which centers Indigeneity and Indigenous ways of knowing subverts western colonial structures (Smith, 2012; Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2019). Decolonizing methodologies are theoretically situated within the context of colonialism and answer to the current ongoing need to dismantle colonial structures and resist colonial practices within education, policy, and all aspects of social work. Culturally Responsive Methodologies emerge from this decolonizing field of research, merging with critical pedagogy, and represent a collaboration among Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, attending to the insider-outsider dialectic and positionality of researchers working in communities to which they are not native, emphasizing practices of relationality, reciprocity, and co-construction that is also present in Indigenous and decolonizing methodologies.

Indigenous scholars (i.e., Dei, 2014; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008) centered within Indigenous frameworks have inserted a methodological framework into the academy that works to disrupt the oppressive traditions of colonizing research, and in turn, bears the potential to unsettle the entire system of oppression that rests within and without its walls and foundations. Indigenous scholars have also defined and (re)claimed research for themselves before and beyond the parameters of the colonial institution. Dei (2012) states: “I see research as an investigation, as a search for knowledge and as a variety of ways to communicate such

knowledge to others in the spirit of shared understandings of our worlds and mutual co-existence” (p. 2) in his argument that research has been a part of Indigenous communities for all of time as a way of transmission and sharing knowledge in relationship with one another. To see research as an inherently necessary process of human life and community necessitates a making space for and upholding of many forms of research that is “authentic” (Meyer, 2008) to the communities who engage in it. Dei (2013) asserts that Indigenous research is a resistance to the notion that only non-Indigenous people are experts on knowledge; Indigenous research is inquiry done from and for its own communities. Indigenous research is healing, is a dialogic encounter, has transformative potential, and is a life-changing ceremony (Dei, 2013; Wilson, 2008).

Indigenous research paradigms are centered within an inquiry of self (Berryman et al, 2012; Wilson, 2008) and relationship to others (Berryman et al, 2012; Dei, 2013; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008), including our more-than-human counterparts (Blenkinsop et al, 2017; Dei, 2013; Meyerhoff & Thompsett, 2017). For Indigenous and non-western scholars, research is also spiritual (Dei, 2013; Meyer, 2008; Shajahan, 2005). As such, knowledge can be revealed and intuited, rather than only observed or assessed. Indigenous research is also keenly attuned to the well-being of community, and community is not always conceptualized in homogenous or limited parameters familiar in western constructs. Community and relations can span zones of space, time, and myriad interconnections (Meyer, 2008; Shajahan, 2005). It is a call to the sacred and divine (Dei, 2013, Shajahan, 2008).

Margaret Kovach (2009) situates Indigenous methodologies within the western paradigm of qualitative methods as a way for both “Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers to understand each other” (Location 537). However, Kovach (2009) reminds us that bringing in Indigenous frameworks into any research setting ethically necessitates a discussion of colonial relationships, “thereby introducing a decolonizing perspective to a critical paradigm” (Location 537). While it can be useful to find common ground between existing western research paradigms and non-western versions of research, Kovach (2009) argues that “Indigenous methodologies are guided by tribal epistemologies, and tribal knowledge is not Western knowledge. Knowledge is neither acultural nor apolitical” (Location 537). As such, in selecting Indigenous Methodologies as a framework for research, the researcher maintains that she is taking a distinct non-western perspective in research within a decolonizing agenda.

Berryman, SooHoo, and Nevin, as Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars working together, merge critical pedagogy and Kaupapa Maori, to create Culturally Responsive Methodologies (CRM). At the heart of this movement are the reflexive and dialogical traditions of critical pedagogy, along with the place-based, community-led and relational ritual-rich traditions of Kaupapa Maori (Berryman et al, 2013). Culturally Responsive Methodologies responds to the prescriptive and dogmatic nature of traditional research with a gentle yet profoundly disruptive response in question: “What is knowledge? How is knowledge produced? Who has the power to produce knowledge? And for whose benefit is the knowledge created?” (Berryman et al, 2013, p. 3). Within the process of questioning and invoking deeper knowing

through the dialogue around the questions, Culturally Responsive Methodologies reminds us of the “situated” relationship between epistemology and research—knowledge is contextual, and our understanding of knowledge is contingent on our own location as a researcher within the communities that share knowledge and co-create knowledge with us (Berryman et al, 2013). It is thus imperative for researchers to know the location of our identities, or our being, of our doing, and then of our learning.

Drawing from a precedence in critical theory, Berryman, SooHoo and Nevin (2013) state that: “In culturally responsive methodologies, not only are the participants’ cultural lives considered essential in the research design but also the lives of the researchers, as both sides bring their collective resources and well-being together to construct a process of relevant and significant meaning making” (p. 5). This is in stark contrast to the traditional model, where the researcher assumes a position of authority and conducts research *on* participants, rather than *with* participants in a way that both researcher and participants can benefit. Critical theory also guides researchers to engage in dialogic action centered on authentic communication, and to practice reflexivity, allowing deep reflection to adjust future action. This foundational shift away from traditional methodologies honors the inherent value in participants. Culturally Responsive Methodologies represents the intention to share power and voice with participants as co-researchers. CRM also maintains that the researcher is not a passive channel, but rather an active tool and lens and thus must assume vigilant responsibility over their thinking and speaking as it affects the lives of their research participants.

As non-Indigenous researcher, I must consider deeply the tension Smith (2012) describes around the question of “Can a non-Maori person be involved in Kaupapa Maori research?”, I honor those who would answer no. I also sit patiently with Smith’s offering that a non-native person may be involved in such research, but not alone, only with native researchers as guides. Smith’s writing is not an open invitation for me. This does not speak for every Indigenous community or any community that I am not a part of. But I sit with the consideration of what it could mean for Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars to work together. Margaret Kovach (2009) describes a possible outcome of this coming together:

“As the academic landscape shifts with an increasing Indigenous presence, there is a desire among a growing community of non-Indigenous academics to move beyond the binaries found within Indigenous– settler relations to construct new, mutual forms of dialogue, research, theory, and action. As long as the academy mirrors a homogeneous reflection of bodies, minds, and methods, our move in this direction is stalled. The infusion of Indigenous knowledge systems and research frameworks informed by the distinctiveness of cultural epistemologies transforms homogeneity. It not only provides another environment where Indigenous knowledges can live but changes the nature of the academy itself. Indigenous methodologies disrupt methodological homogeneity in research.” (Kovach, 2009, Location 210)

Identifying myself as a researcher who desires to move beyond the binaries of Indigenous-settler relations, grounded in my belief that settler colonialism is unethical and damaging to

our places and communities, I follow work such as that created by Berryman, SooHoo, and Nevin (2013) as a team of Indigenous with non-Indigenous scholars, and Tuck and Yang (2012) who write together as an Indigenous and non-Indigenous team calling out settler colonialism and demonstrating how to uphold a decolonizing agenda within the academy. I lean into the guidance offered by Indigenous and decolonizing scholars who offer insight into constructing new relational paradigms, doing more authentic and reciprocal research. Steinberg and Kincheloe (2008) offer the following guidelines for “learning about, researching, and teaching Indigenous knowledges” (p. xix):

1. An understanding of Indigenous ways of seeing encourages rethinking the purposes in education.
2. We must address the ways knowledge is produced and legitimated.
3. We encourage the inclusion of Indigenous and subjugated knowledges in a just and equitable manner.
4. We receive new insights, new experiences—knowledge applies to local contexts and cannot be swapped out into different contexts but can inform other bodies of knowledge.
5. Knowledge no longer possess “a truth or truths but instead become a series of ways to know”. (p. xix)

Empowered by theory and standing on the shoulders of other culturally responsive researchers, I believe in the power of shared knowledge and inquiry, across boundaries of culture and community. Decolonizing theory and culturally responsive methodology have become a place of healing and empowerment for many researchers, including me, to redefine research in terms of

love and hope for the world.

Narrative Storywork, Portraiture, & Autoethnography: Instrument & Medium

Qualitative research is used often by culturally responsive researchers because of its potential for empowering the voices of participants. Narrative research allows for the researcher to capture the rich, storied existences of their participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), in a way that intentionally resists the flattening or essentializing of participants that traditional quantitative research has historically done to colonized communities (Berryman et al, 2013). For many Indigenous researchers (i.e., Berryman et. al. 2012; Smith, 2012) narrative or storytelling is not novel, is not an artistic choice. It is an embedded and valued transmission of information, part of the ontologies and epistemologies of Indigeneity (Berryman et al, 2012). It is the foregrounding of Indigenous voice (Dei, 2103) in a modality that is authentic to the traditions of research within their own communities (Berryman et al, 2012).

Narrative & Storywork

In this study, narrative is what I call my process of being in conversation with my co-storyers, in our relationally shared living and learning experiences. It is the process in which we talk story and create story together. It is their stories shared with me, mine with them, the ones we make together, the ones we give to the world (some stories are kept, not shared). For this study, I employ qualitative tools such as observation, participation-observation, recorded dialogue, fieldnotes, and researchers' journals (Baily, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) to document my stories and experiences within each place. Yet, in this study, I hold and make

space for the construction of story and meaning to emerge from the participants themselves (Leavy, 2018); co-storyers at each site (along with a limited number of folks each co-storyer invites into the dialogue) contribute to the data with conversation, interviews, and reflection, and shape how that data is interpreted.

From an Indigenous perspective, stories are inseparable from knowledge and from the people who transmit knowledge and from the relationships between the teller and the listener (Kovach, 2009). As a justification for story in research, Windchief and San Pedro (2019) tell us that “This dialogic, intergenerational storying approach is accessible and graceful, but also answerable and rigorous” and remind us that “Indigenous storywork is not easy” (p. xi). Researchers who employ storywork must attend carefully to what is being shared and for what purposes, grounding all knowledge contextually so that nothing can be expropriated inappropriately (Windchief & San Pedro, 2019, p. xi). Despite the challenges researchers face when they take on storywork as method, Windchief and San Pedro (2019) maintain that it is necessary: “Storywork is Native futurity in practice” (p. xi).

In this tradition of storywork, throughout my research I use the term *story* in reference to speak of our lived experiences, knowledge, and understandings of our world and our contexts through conversation and spoken or written words. Story is regarded as valid data for this study. As the researcher, I do not assume authority or superiority over the sources of the story. Rather, I view my role in this process as one who helps the stories to emerge by being present and listening, by creating opportunity for reflection and posing questions to make

sense of the stories, both collectively and individually but with an awareness of the collectively constructed nature of meaning, and to ask critical questions about the stories and what they implicate for our existences and futures.

Clandinin & Connelly (2000) speak of narrative inquiry as being worked out in a three-dimensional space—temporality, personal, and social—and as traveling in five directions: forward, backward, inward, outward, and situated in place. Their conceptualization of narrative inquiry resonates with Meyer’s (2013) description of “Native Common Sense”, holographic epistemology, in which she describes “knowledge inclusive of three aspects of nature” (p. 1): (1) body: external, physical, objective, content; (2) mind: internal, mental, subjective; and (3) spirit: transpatial, non-physical, cultural. Narrative, then, is a way to do research that can seek to embody the multidimensionality of what Meyer (2013) terms “new-old-wisdom”, knowledge that is situated in place (Meyer, 2008), in the margins (Smith, 2012), in Indigeneity (Dei, 2013), in relations (Berryman et al, 2012; Smith, 2012).

Portraiture

Portraiture is a particular branch of narrative methods, developed by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot, which “blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experiences and organizational life” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv). Because portraiture seeks to record and interpret such complexities of both the people it studies as well as the ways they are organized in spaces and the information carried in the relationships among constituent groups of people, it is an

appropriate method to employ when studying schools, comprised of many people with both shared and differing stories, perspectives, beliefs, and experiences.

Portraiture resists the inherent deficit-model thinking of more evaluative methods in qualitative research, selecting instead to focus on an aesthetic and nuanced presentation of data and analysis, framed by a phenomenological lens (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). It seeks to “illuminate the complex dimensions of goodness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xvi) not only how the portraitist sees it but also how the subjects tell of it. This is not to say that the method of portraiture rejects criticality, as it places the drawing of the portrait in social and cultural context and is shaped dialogically between the researcher as portraitist and the subject or participant. The portraits then “are shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one participating in the drawing of the image” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3). This dialogical nature of portraiture allows for rich encounters between the researcher and participants and for a more authentic rendering of the portrait (as findings and analysis) to emerge from their joint construction.

Portraiture also allows for the researcher to position themselves within the picture that they study, “not in the center dominating the action and overwhelming the scene, but on the edge witnessing what is happening and revealing her angle of vision” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) explains the intention in including the portraitist (researcher) within the frame (data and analysis): “The researcher is the stranger, the newcomer, the interloper—entering the place, engaging the people, and disturbing the natural

rhythms of the environment— so her presence must be made explicit. The portraitist is clear: from where I sit, this is what I see; these are the perspectives and biases I bring; this is the scene I select; this is how people seem to be responding to my presence” (p. 50). This extends the practice of naming the researcher’s positionality that is now common in much qualitative research and necessary in CRM. In portraiture, the researcher examines her place in the research in an ongoing, dynamic way and attends to placing herself appropriately within the portrait as an attempt to give the reader a more authentic picture of *how* the data and findings emerged and were shaped into a static image presented in the study. Discretion is crucial in this “paradoxical” positioning of the portraitist’s voice in the picture; the authors instruct: “it is everywhere, *and* it is judiciously placed; it is central and it is peripheral” (p. 86). This process necessarily attends to biases and limitations, reminding the viewer of the researcher’s humanity as a medium to channel seeing in research, while centering other voices and not overshadowing the larger emergent picture.

To capture rich, nuanced, dynamic, and complex phenomenon present in the spaces of research, portraiture continues in the tradition of Clifford Geertz’ (1973) “thick descriptions” (p. 6), the practice of “constructing” the research, which Geertz defines as “the researcher’s constructions of other people’s constructions of what they are up to” (p. 9). This process of construction employs imagination and creativity to shape what the story or picture becomes, admitting to elements of subjectivity or even fiction as Geertz describes. While these challenges the attempts of traditional research to claim objectivity and obscure bias, it does not forego

rigor and “systematic attention to the details of social reality and human experience” (p.17).

Embracing the aesthetic within narrative methods such as portraiture is, rather, an attempt to present information more authentically, convicted that any human work bears subjectivity and bias, yet by naming this bias, judiciously placing ourselves within the frame, developing meaningful relationships of collaboration and co-construction with participants, and discerning what elements to include in the story or picture, we are doing a research work that uncovers the deeper, more poignant truths embedded in our human experiences.

A predecessor to my research, Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua (2013) employs portraiture in her research of the Hawaiian community school which also participates in my study, making portraiture a natural choice as a methodological tool for this study. As I work in Indigenous and other historically marginalized communities in this study, it is imperative that I seek ways to counter deficit-framed research or researcher-centered research. Portraiture allows me to center relational learning among myself and my co-storyers, while also making space to examine myself as a part of the landscape, centering a collective paradigm that feels more authentic to this research. Furthermore, as my study is concerned with the complex phenomenology that emerges from schools as multi-layered entities—encompassing space and place, people, relationships, organized structures, activities, pedagogy, beliefs, customs and practices, multiple mediums of expression, and complex effects on wider social and natural networks—portraiture is an appropriate medium to account for such complexity while constructing research to be accessible and meaningful to an audience.

Critical Autoethnography

As a final tool in my creative toolbox, I employ critical autoethnography selectively in this study. While not a central medium to the research presentation, elements of critical autoethnography can be seen throughout this study. Autoethnography, while encompassing multiple definitions and forms, broadly refers to a research method that connects the “autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). Robin Boylorn and Mark Orbe (2021) offer that autoethnography is “a bridge between cultural curiosities and personal lived experiences” (p. 1) and that the autoethnographer “researches themselves in relation to others” (p. 4). Employing many of the same tools as traditional ethnography, such as field notes, observations, researcher’s journal, and rich descriptions, autoethnography includes the additional standpoint of documenting and examining the researcher’s firsthand experiences as a part of the body of research (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021).

While un-critical autoethnography may err on focusing too narrowly on the individual experiences without paying attention to social context or larger cultural issues, Boylorn and Orbe (2021) tell us that “critical autoethnography invites self-interrogation and cultural accountability by attending to lived experience and/as epistemology and critical inquiry. Critical autoethnography shifts the gaze of/as Other toward cultural constructs, social circumstances, and oppressive inequalities to examine our lives as lived while critiquing and dismantling the contexts that bind us” (p. 6). In this methodology, theory and critical self-examination grounded in intersectionality play crucial roles in the deconstruction of experience

and the construction of critical analysis through storytelling. The aim for such critical autoethnography as a research method, then, is to examine the social structures which privilege some while limiting others and to stimulate new practices to rebuild the world around us by offering explanatory theoretical frameworks to demystify the world around us, making knowledge and a path to action accessible to the people who may most benefit from it (Boylorn and Orbe, 2021).

Critical autoethnography further extends the practice that CRM and portraiture have established, of making space for the researcher's voice in the presentation of research. Beyond uncovering personal bias and telling a more realistic story of how the research process occurs, critical autoethnography brings the personal voice in a reflexive dialogue with theory and data as a sense-making tool throughout the research process. At each moment, personal reflexivity is employed to theoretically uncover deeper meanings behind interpersonal and inter-cultural interactions and interconnections; thus, not only does the researcher learn and change, but she also attempts to explain larger cultural issues and inform future action or praxis (Boylorn and Orbe, 2021). This method informs my research by embedding an intentional use of the personal voice to document the critical reflexivity I engage in at each stage of my research process. I also employ this method to make this research accessible, meaningful, relatable, and memorable to my audience in the hopes that this research can catalyze further necessary conversations and praxis around futures in community education centered in decolonizing Indigenous and Indigenous-aligned paradigms.

Ethics, Trustworthiness, & Authenticity

In this next section, I describe how trustworthiness was established within the researcher-participant relationship, examine the ethical considerations taken within this research process, and outline the ways in which authenticity was reflexively examined to justify this research as authentic, worthy, and defensible within a collective, decolonizing paradigm.

Relationships

A foundational part of our research dialogue will center around critical issues of equity and access. This distinguishes our work from that which is done in higher-resource communities that may cater to families who can afford private education or homeschooling/unschooling. Thus, we have located spaces of learning that have taken on a specific intention of serving the whole spectrum of diversity within communities but is rooted in the self-determination of traditionally marginalized people (Bell, 2013) and that fit the following criteria: 1) alternative to and autonomous from traditional systems, 2) practicing decolonizing pedagogy, and 3) demonstrating place-based awareness. The schools at the heart of this study demonstrate varying degrees of autonomy from socio-political systems, varying place-based practices, and varying interpretations of decolonizing work. This study includes learning spaces that were born out of Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous communities of color. The diversity of sites intends to allow for a richer and broader discussion about the possibilities in alternative-autonomous, decolonizing education. The sites included in this study are: a land-based K-12 public charter grown from a native Hawaiian community in

O'ahu established 1999 and an equity-focused, democratic, project-based independent 6-12 school that opened 2014 in Los Angeles, California.

Holding to culturally responsive and decolonizing methodologies, my entire research design is hinged on creating dialogical relationships and the co-creation of information with my participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, Kovach, 2009). Thus, our participants were made aware of this study through referral from colleagues, from meeting the researcher through conferences, or from letters of introduction from the researcher, entering through an opening of mutual colleague or interest. Participants joined this study through a culturally responsive process of relationship-building, dialogue, and determination of reciprocity (Berryman et al., 2013). Reasons that participants joined this study and ways in which they may benefit from participating in this study include: desire for more visibility of their sites and decolonizing work, to share their knowledge and messages about land-conscious and decolonizing practices with a wider audience, the opportunity for self-study and reflection, or a relational sense of responsibility to the researcher and desire to contribute to her learning in the area of alternative-autonomous schools.

Reciprocity

I drew on Decolonizing, Indigenous, and Culturally Responsive Methodologies as an ethical guidepost during research, examining the ongoing well-being of participants, through dialogue and reflection. Throughout the research process, I sought reciprocity (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001) and to be mindful of participants' power and self-determination

(Berryman et al., 2013). As such, my entire research design recognized non-dominant and Indigenous knowledges in a mutually beneficial and authentic way (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). At any point where the research may seem to do more harm than good to the participant communities, we collaboratively adjusted, redefined, and even abandoned aspects of the research to better serve the communities involved.

Our process was one of reciprocity (Harrison et al, 2001), maintaining a mutual sense of the shared benefit that we will all receive through this research. Our layered conversations helped us collectively to articulate our thoughts and experiences in this work of creating and sustaining alternative, authentic, communal schools. My co-storyers and I hope that the collective dissemination of knowledge and practical skills in this study will transcend the temporal boundaries of this research project to further empower and reinforce the grassroots communal schooling efforts of their communities and all others who come in touch with this research.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, I needed to make ethical considerations about the health and well-being of my participants. In navigating the risks of a global pandemic, I took every precaution to quarantine, COVID test, and abide by health codes of conduct such as always wearing a mask during my in-person times with my participants. My co-storyers and I constructed the research design in very flexible terms, having to adapt daily and weekly to new developments and protocol related to the pandemic. Additionally, I maintained a sensitivity to

my co-storyers mental health and overall well-being, in awareness that my presence and bringing research activity into their spaces was an additional tax on their time, energy, and resources as they are already experiencing great limitations because of the pandemic. Furthermore, as the pandemic has brought many instances of great loss and grief into our personal lives and that of our communities, prioritizing appropriate pause or abandonment of research activity in lieu of relational and self-care became an ethical necessity throughout this process.

Research ethics also call for the consideration of anonymity of participants. Prior to participating in research, participants provided informed consent through verbal and written agreement for their participation in the data collection process and the inclusion of their stories in this study. However, I continued to uphold the responsibility throughout the data collection process to check in with participants about the specific inclusion of information, especially as it pertained to loss of anonymity. Both of my co-storyers as key informants elected to be identified by their true names. They also suggested that I use the true names of their schools. This practice of foregoing anonymity is aligned to Indigenous methodologies which sees the information as inseparable from the storyteller (Windchief & San Pedro, 2019). However, under the instruction of my co-storyers as guides and gatekeepers of their own communities (along with general ethical practices adhered to in qualitative research), the names of minors who were included in this study were made anonymous. Adult graduates of the schools who self-elected to participate in the research were referred to by their true names, with their permission.

Trustworthiness

Meaningful and impactful qualitative research calls for measures of trustworthiness; doing culturally responsive and critically radical research necessitates measures of trustworthiness that take into consideration the relationships and experience of the participants and the outcome of the study, along with the authenticity of the findings. As Moss describes: “Trustworthiness must move beyond the context in which the study is conducted and include the situating of the resultant knowledge or voices of critique in the academy for a participatory democracy to become more intersubjective between researcher, researched, and literature.” (Moss, 2004, p.369). As I proceed with my study, I looked for the measures of trustworthiness that best positioned my work to be validated within this triangulation of researcher, researched, and literature.

Throughout the research process I held to the following questions as my tethers to accountability and recalibration along the way, while allowing new questions of self-examination to surface as needed.

The Ask: How do you introduce yourself and make your learning desire known? How do you ensure you are not imposing an outside agenda on them but opening the dialogue for a reciprocal relationship?

Ritual of Encounter: How do you be invited and establish relationships with each place? How do you present an authentic version of who you are while being completely open to learn them, exactly as they show themselves?

The Being in the Place: Do you come with something or come as empty as you can? Do you observe or participate? Do you offer service? Can you even give anything? How do you sustain yourself so you are not a burden to them? How do you recognize the way you disrupt their balance without being more disruptive? Can you find a place for you within this place? What will it mean to find a place only to leave in a brief time? What do you do in awareness of this movement in and out and the spaces you take up and the gaps you leave?

The dialogue: How will conversations take place? What layers will be present? Will participants have freedom to disclose their truths? How will “data” be gathered? What knowledge can be recorded by you, an outsider? How will you be cautious of what you don’t hear or mishear? How will you hold awareness of what you don’t know or whose voices may be missing? (Moss, 2004)

The sense-making: Who and what will guide you through the data? Will you go back to them? Can you work together? When your lenses limit you, how does the collective move with these limitations? How will they check you? How will they process with you? How will the understandings crystallize understandings (Richardson, 1997)? How will you hold space for negative cases and patterns that contradict what you had hoped to find?

The dissemination: What are the messages that need to be said? How do they need to be delivered? To whom? Who decides this? What process takes place to manifest this? What balances and protects this? Where is power channeled? Is there as much benefit for as many people as possible in this process? Who or what checks and guides us toward common benefit?

Because this research is deeply personal and its agenda is radical in nature, the presence of

measurements for accountability and trustworthiness are essential. Thinking of Ferguson & Ferguson's (2000) notion of *utility*, I looked for opportunities for this research to demonstrate enlightenment utility on *what* these spaces are, and how they came to be. I also examined if this study held emancipatory utility—concluding that the telling of these stories proves the possibility for further paradigmatic shifts in what is considered research in the institution and in giving insight to communities around the world who may be seeking conversation around decolonizing, place-based and autonomous learning environments for their learners.

Finally, perhaps with most consideration, I looked to Dei's (2013) conceptualization of Indigenous research as an outline for reflecting on trustworthiness. I evaluated if this research was (1) a healing process that connected us to our physical, social, emotional, and spiritual selves, (2) a dialogic encounter that “sustained local peoples’ capacity to undertake their own research, under their own terms and rules of engagement” (p. 5), (3) a transformative process that pushed against oppressive forces towards catalyzing lasting change in the spaces on which it resists, and (4) a life-changing ceremony through which the researcher and participants became “a ‘community of learners’...operating with shared responsibilities about the goal, purpose, ethics and values of social research” (p. 10). Our research process was validated collectively within the community of learners we created within this research process as we strived for this research to become all these things.

Summary

This study is designed with intentionality to be decolonizing, culturally responsive, centered on Indigenous principles such as reciprocity and meaningful relationships with the communities who research with me. Furthermore, this study employs methods of narrative, specifically storywork, portraiture, and autoethnography to document, construct, and illustrate the complex phenomenon present in my sites of research and within the lived experiences of my co-storyers and myself as a research subject. These methods guide me in a critical examination of cultural and social intersections within our personal lived experiences and catalyze a discussion around the praxis which may emerge from theoretically analyzing the contexts, stories, and experiences included in this study. Furthermore, these methods allow for the aesthetic, rich, and nuanced depiction of our findings and conclusions as constructions of both imagination and rigorous attention to detail. Finally, this research design seeks to be of the highest ethical standard, centering the well-being and benefit of the co-researchers and their communities; trustworthiness is considered throughout the research process in practices that bring us to reflect and determine if this process is co-constructed, locally authenticated, useful, and transformative to all those who participate.

Portrait I– To Whom the Story Belongs

Portraits of the Storytellers

To help contextualize my research, I will use two portrait chapters to introduce you to the people and places from which my findings have emerged. The entirety of my research and analysis is informed by the ongoing multi-year relationships I have formed with co-storyers Trevor and Ndindi through a process of collective learning and inquiry, and our parallel journeys as educators and scholars, grounded in Indigenous, humanizing, and sustainable ways of learning and being. As such, I view Ndindi, Trevor, and myself as three main subjects and co-storyers of this research, and our conversations, stories, and shared experiences are the data from which the research findings have emerged. This chapter, my first of two portrait chapters, will introduce the reader to Ndindi, Trevor, and Joey and document how the three of us came into an agreement to collaborate on this research. I begin this chapter with my story which serves to position my lens and writing within my intersectional identities and to name my biases as a researcher. Then, I story how I became connected to Ndindi and Trevor, focusing on how these relationships emerged within a framework of collective culture and culturally responsive methodologies. Finally, I offer a brief biography of Trevor and Ndindi. I conclude this chapter with an explanation of how I bring our stories together and use a lens of collective sense-making to examine the data.

Storying My Positionality

As a culturally responsive researcher (i.e., Behar, 1994; Berryman et. al.: Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I claim my subjectivity as an integral lens to this study. By naming my subjectivity, I am practicing making sense of the world around me, rooted in non-dominant ways of being, of knowing, and of relating to one another and to our environment. Thus, I am claiming my right to be embodied (Darder, 2015) and I am resisting colonizing attempts in the academy to erase non-western identities and cosmologies. As Clandinin & Connelly (2000) put it, we live *storied* existences. Our stories and subjectivities crack this hegemonic mold and re-story our world into one that is far more diverse, reflective, inclusive, and authentic. I thus illustrate the insider-outsider nature of my existence. My understanding, *unfinished* as Freire (1998) describes, of the ways in which I was *born* into the world and the ways I have *become* in the world is vital to my understanding of how to carry myself and how to work for change in this world. It is impossible to do work to understand others if we do not first understand ourselves. First, I will story my inherited positionalities. Then I will story how I have come to understand the problem with schools from within my own contextual experience.

Home?



Figure 1- Liu Family Old House

July 20, 2018

This picture is taken in what used to be the courtyard of the Liu Family Old House. My Ah Gong grew up here and as an adult, he lived in one of the wings with his family while his brothers lived in other wings and his parents in the main house. This was the traditional way of life.

On June 10, 1961, my Ah Po was very pregnant and working in the field when the contractions came. She kept working

through the first few stages of waves until she knew she couldn't work anymore. Then she started to walk back to the house alone. Before she could even finish walking up the stairs to the bedroom, my father's head began to crown and she supported it with her hand as she made it up the final steps. When she got to the room she grabbed onto the handles of the large wooden dresser and squatted over a bamboo mat to finish pushing. Before the midwife could even be summoned, my Ah Po had completed the process of welcoming her son, my baba, into the world.

On a day in April 1989, my twin and I were a little over a year old and visiting our relatives at the Old House. As we were passed from one family member to another in this same courtyard, we both somehow found courage to take our first steps at the same time, in the same place. So, in this place, my journey of walking began.

Coming to this space, though it's deteriorating now, cut in half by a road, built by the government of Taiwan without asking, straight through our old home. Ironically the only road that connects the whole north of the island straight down to the south is the one that divided our family home in half...coming back now, this time with the one year anniversary approaching of the time I myself squatted to push and catch the head of my own son's head as it fell to earth...this time as my arms are full of my one who has also just taken his first steps...this time, as milestones and life itself feels much more tangible now, our memories here are especially present, meaningful, and guiding.

So much about where we are going can be found, in different ways, when we look to where we have come from.

Being Hakka (The Guest People) means you don't have land, but you care for the land you have. You don't take up more space than you need. When the garden you've tended is in abundance, you give to everyone what you have grown. Your best tools are your own two hands. Being Hakka is coming with your

hands full to visit homes, your hands empty to help with the work. Your best tools are your own two feet, always to stand firm, be on the move. Hakka women never bound their feet because we work in the fields. We stand next to men. Hakka people are resourceful. Instead of riches, we have family. Hakka women have our own voice. We build houses, tend fields with babies on our backs. Hakka woman means endurance. Laugh lines spread like many rivers from the corners of my Ah Po's eyes, beautiful because she has swallowed much bitterness but she still laughs. Being Hakka means knowing how to whisper, have hushed conversations in corners of rooms in houses with too many people. Gifts given in secret. Asking in secret: How are you? How can I help you? Money exchanges hands of two people and no one else knows. You sneak out the back door to take sick relative to the doctor before anyone else sees they are sick. Stories with tears of loss are shared in low tones, in small spaces. But so are news of the promotion, the award, the new house. Don't seek attention. But what is loud is the yelling over 30 people's voices about how to cut the mochi with chopsticks, how to peel the fruit with a clever. You're doing it wrong. Move. Let me do it. We nag to love. The harder you love, the louder you nag. What is loud is the clapping and laughing to make the babies smile. The clamor over a round farm table full of dishes grown from Ah Gong's garden and cooked by all the women in the back kitchen. An intricate dance of people and animals, too many in a small space, never colliding, harmonizing in a buzz. Uttering sounds foreign to outsiders' ears. Sounds our ancestors carried with them from a place we don't remember and can't call home. But this feels like home.

Coming to Decolonizing Waters

I am Hakka-Irish-British-German. I am a woman. I am a mother. I am diasporic. I am a settler. I write and engage in scholarship on unceded lands that belong to the Tongva people and other native nations who have stewarded and inhabited these places long before settler-colonial occupation. I raise my family and teach students on these illegally occupied lands (known in dominant terms as Los Angeles and Orange County) to which I was brought by my family when I was 7 years old, having lived first on Duwamish lands (Seattle). To be clear, I trespass on lands which the settler-state of the United States of America has seized and occupied illegally. I, my family, and my ancestors were not invited to be here by the people of

this land. Because of this, I am a part of the settler colonization of this place. As a mother and educator who cares deeply for the earth and the world all our children will grow up in, my heart is open, and my spirit is receiving to learn and co-construct better ways to care for people, place, and power. I am committed to a process of unsettling colonial structures, including and beginning with examining and divesting from the systems I also benefit from as a settler with approximation to whiteness, and collaboratively reinventing the world with those who are also committed to a decolonizing work.

I was invited into academia by my friend Paolo, a graduate of this doctoral program. My students and my community urged me to enter the program. Together, we hoped my scholarship would bring further resources and stability to the organizing work we were doing within our communities. I came to decolonizing waters looking for belonging, for them and for me. I am unfinished because I am still becoming and still learning (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Freire, 1998). This research is a part of my journey to write myself into more clarity and coherence, examining my biases and privileges, remembering my cultures and inherited knowledges, and walking with others who shape my capacity and responsibility to service in decolonizing work.

I include this narrative to reframe my positionality. In this reframing, I maintain my uncertainty and unfinishedness, necessary conditions of a person who occupies spaces in which they are invasive. I dance with, sit with, listen, and wait. Decolonization is unsettling. Decolonization is necessary. I remember my ancestors have walked this path for many years. I

take up my sojourning story with theirs. In this way, I walk to extract myself from an existence in settler-colonialism. I walk to be an immigrant, not settler, but a guest person, “beholden to the Indigenous laws and epistemologies of the lands I migrate to” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6).

My mother’s family are descended from British colonists and Irish refugees, who settled for generations on Duwamish lands. My father is the eighth generation of his Hakka family to live in Taiwan, our ancestors having immigrated there, as part of the greater Hakka diaspora, hundreds of years before the establishment of the Chinese government on the island. At the time my ancestors made home on that island, they did so peacefully with the aboriginal tribes (so we are told through oral traditions), inhabiting land that had been previously unused on the west side of the island's central mountain ranges. I was born in Taiwan and my first language is Hakka. It is also the language I speak with my two children. It is an endangered language, and our oral histories are often not found in textbooks or schools. The oral histories passed down to us are embedded with pride in caring for the land, in working hard, in remaining humble, and in living peacefully with others. I speak Hakka because it is the only language my father and my grandparents have ever spoken to me. I speak Hakka so that my identity and that of my father and his parents and theirs will not be erased.

Much of my life has felt like a negotiation of margins, straddling many borders. For much of my formative years, my family existed somewhere on the path between working and middle class, an upward movement gained solely through my father’s physical labor as a construction worker and undying commitment to his “American Dream” as the single earner

for our household. I did not attend school until I enrolled in community college classes at age 16. I worked under-the-table jobs from 12 years old until I was hired as a public-school teacher, never working for a corporation my whole life. In many ways, I grew up outside the parameters of society, many aspects of my life not conforming to the status quo. As bi-racial, transnational, multilingual, and multicultural people, my sisters and I struggled to see ourselves in our communities and in the larger society. In addition, by leaving the place of our birth to immigrate to California, we were also disconnected from the greater diasporic Hakka community and our extended Hakka family. Though we spoke and practiced Hakka customs at home, the outside world knew almost nothing about our cultural identities. In addition, I am also neuro-divergent, processing my experiences and surroundings differently to neuro-typical peers, navigating social systems that were not designed for those like me.

My life and my identities have brought me to seek deeply for belonging and harmony with both human communities and the natural world. While growing up disconnected from larger social institutions has marginalized me in some ways as I journeyed through higher education and into my profession in education, I have learned to be grateful for many aspects of my life and identity, as they allowed me to escape much of the institutionalized colonizing that my peers may have received in school and other social settings. As a researcher, I am still critical of my biases and my outsider status in communities with which I am unfamiliar. The dance of crossing boundaries and quietly, peacefully ascertaining if I am welcome to stay, to learn, and to cultivate the land is one I hope to always practice and center in my work and living,

so that my presence in others' spaces is one that does them no harm and that honors my ancestors' legacies, from both sides, as much as it unsettles any privileges I have obtained within in this settler-colonial hegemony.

Problem Posing Dialogically from My Classroom

I cast my memory to the contexts that brought me to this study initially several years ago. At a time when the school system seemed so fixed and unchanging, my students (consisting of mostly Black, Brown Asian, Pacific Islander, and other marginalized young people from a working-class community) and I engaged daily in dialogue about our dissatisfaction with the status quo, particularly in education. We had labored within our small carved-out spaces of classroom and pockets of community to resist the racist, classist, deficit-minded colonial impositions we faced daily. Despite establishing a thriving BSU, spoken word slam team, English Learner community, SPED community, and robust lunchtime and after school activities for students from cross-sections within my classroom, my students and I faced unending backlash and resistance for our organizing work in the larger school and district community, ultimately making our efforts unsustainable.

After nine years as a public high school teacher in Southern California, guided by the voices of the families I served, I began to realize what might be the best way to learn for my diverse community may not exist, or be allowed to exist, within dominant school systems. I began to seek spaces where I and my students could be free to learn in cultural autonomy. My partner Michael, the father of our children, and the person with whom I most closely journey in

life and research, is a Filipino Black-American raised in Hawai'i. He is shaped by his first-hand experiences of decolonizing and Indigenous-based knowledges, informing his cultural-sensitivity and land-consciousness. Together, we began to seek ways to live guided by decolonizing principles for the sake of our own children, communities, and the earth. We ask: how can we participate in creating and sustaining conditions where every human can thrive in authenticity to their identity and place? This wondering and seeking, grounded in our identities and contexts, shaped the inquiry that would become this dissertation.

Becoming Connected

Meeting Ndindi

In 2018, when my doctoral adviser, Suzanne SooHoo, *finally* agreed that I had landed on my dissertation topic—to survey and learn with community-grown, decolonizing schools—we both knew it wouldn't be appropriate or culturally responsive for me to ask to research with communities I was a complete outsider to. I needed a guide, someone to introduce me. So, Suzi introduced me to Ndindi. Ndindi Kitonga had been one of Suzi's first doctoral students at Chapman University and she had gone on to create Angeles Workshop School, a small (around 20-25 students total), radical (based on Freirean, Marxist, and Indigenous frameworks) independent school (receiving no public funding) in the Palms area of Los Angeles. As Suzi began describing Angeles Workshop School to me, a school Ndindi began with her partner Scott, I immediately began to feel the tinglings of affinity; Suzi's descriptions matched in several ways with the dreams my partner, Michael, and I had begun to put into conversation

about what our own community-grown school could look and feel like. In addition, by Suzi's account, Ndindi would be my *xue jie*, "School Elder Sister," a relationship in Chinese cultures which I understood first-hand and knew how to engage within.

I first met Ndindi sometime in 2018 at my sister's restaurant in East Los Angeles, my father and sister were there to support me and show hospitality to Ndindi, understanding the importance of meeting a *xue jie* for the first time and the impact this relationship could have on my academic success. As we made our way through many courses of food, Ndindi and I connected over our journeys as trans-national women in LA, as educators, and Ph.D. students. There was a familiarity of conversation style with Ndindi, a question prompts the sharing of a story which is followed by a sharing of a similar story from the other and then stories begin to emerge back and forth and weave together as layers and pieces of understanding emerge, all punctuated with comments about the food and questions about ingredients which only prompt more stories about life, customs, and experiences. Our stories rolled into different accounts of our culture, coming to America, our relationships with parents, how they see us as scholars/educators, traditions, foods, and beliefs. I spoke about being Hakka, multi-racial, trans-national. She drew parallels to being Kamba, from Kenya, in the US. We shared back and forths on our current lives and experiences with partnership, activism, community-building, the doing/being behind our learning and speaking. At the end of dinner, Ndindi invited me to visit her school. She had an ask for me in return which was to come prepared with a lesson on Hakka culture for her students, to which my sister contributed a sharing size of traditional

Hakka mochi.

That year, 2019, I would cross paths with Ndindi through various Chapman events several times, in addition to that day-long visit to Angeles Workshop school. I began to develop a deeper sense of kinship with Ndindi. We would have several conversations that would help to understand my own identity, to examine how I and others can think about Indigeneity, diaspora, settler migration, and the human experience of belonging. Over the course of that year, I had also been conceptualizing my dissertation study. One of the outcomes of my visit to her school with my partner Michael was an invitation to return for extended research for my dissertation study. Through the conversations Ndindi, Scott, Michael, and I had shared throughout that day, I felt like the seedlings of ideas that I had been carrying for my dissertation began to be co-constructed into a fuller, more tangible thing. With both this invitation and this idea about what my study was, I moved towards connecting to more participants.

Meeting Trevor

When the personal connections Suzi and my committee members had to other community- grown schools were either limited or not drawing an invitation for me to connect (refusal is a necessary action for Indigenous and other communities to exercise in caring for themselves), I began to consider the possibilities of forming new relationships—through academic conferences and casting a wider net of association—with folks who may know something about this work of community-grown autonomous schools. I still intended to

maintain principles of relationship, being guided into new places and connections. Suzi put me in touch with her colleague, Kevin Kumashiro, who organizes an annual conference in Honolulu. I had a brief exchange with Kevin over email about our mutual connection to Suzi and about my proposed research. The conference is relatively small and, because Kevin organizes most of the conference personally, has a core relational essence. Before the conference, Kevin connected me through email to Trevor, an educator from Hālau Kū Māna, a Hawaiian public charter school, who would also be presenting at the conference on his land-based work in the community-centered school.

The conference was held at the UH Mānoa Lab School, a K-12 school on the university campus. For Michael, this would be a trip back home to O'ahu and his first time attending an educational conference with me. His presence allowed me to lean into the collective intention of my work and the collective nature of our cultures. For Michael, as a UH alum who has grown up on this island, this conference was a significant time of reorienting and reflection. Hawai'i is home for him, though he struggles with his increasing awareness of his settler identity in this place. In dialogue with him, I wondered if I could ever be authentically welcomed into these spaces that are home for him but have not been home to me.

We attended Trevor's session where he and the other presenters, teachers from other Hawaiian charter schools, gave us an overview of their annual stream cleanup project. Once a year, students from various Hawaiian charter schools come together to clean up a stream, removing rubbish and invasive species of plants and animals. Students track data and over the

years they have obtained evidence that this stream clean-up is helping to keep invasive species numbers down and allowing native species to increase.

On the screen, the presenters put up a slide that asked: *‘O wai ‘oe? Who are you? What stream are you?* They explained the question is commonly translated to “Who are you?”, but it denotes, “What stream are you?” Thus, Native Hawaiians conceptualize identity in connection to the water you drink from, as water gives life. During the share-out time, I found out my conversation partner and I both had ancestors from County Cork, Ireland. Trevor also shared that he had ancestors from County Cork. I noted how novel this was for me to connect with folks in our mixed ancestry, yet each holding onto a thread tracing us back to one specific place. It may have been the first time in my life that my white ancestry had yielded me a sense of pride and connection to others, and I recognized that what made this experience different and special was a knowledge of the *place* from which our ancestors had inhabited and traveled from.

After the session, Michael and I met with Trevor and he asked me, “Tell me more about what it is that you’re doing or looking for?” I chatted briefly about my ideas for research, sharing all that I had thought of so far. After listening, Trevor mentioned that he was also in a Ph.D. program at the University of Hawai‘i. He resonated with the land-based and student film elements I had brought up about my study, but I could sense he was still guarded about me coming in to do research at his school. He invited us to join him in attending one of his colleagues' sessions and introduced us to his teaching partner. Though Trevor was attending to us and helping us make connections, I internally reflected on how much trepidation I was

experiencing in this early stage of relationship-building. I worried that I was trespassing into places I did not have a right to go and anticipated Trevor's refusal of my presence and proposal to do work in these spaces.

After the conference, Trevor and I maintained occasional email communication. I could sense that he was leaving the door open to feel me out but was cautious and needed to know more about my identity, my framework, and how I would be as a visitor and potentially a researcher on his campus. Even after granting me invitation to come to the school and film the student stream clean-up day as a part of my research project, Trevor, as a "gatekeeper" for the school, still maintained a direct line of questions with me about my intentions and positionality, as we planned logistics for the research. Later he would tell me that as a non-Native scholar coming in, he needed to vet me before introducing me to other members of the school community. After a couple of years of communication via email or video call, spanning the COVID shutdown, Trevor vouched for me to his admin, introducing me as a visiting researcher to the campus whom he would host within his classroom community. With this invitation, I knew I still needed to earn and maintain his and his community's trust, but I anxiously prepared to begin research at their school.

Biographies

The rest of the research story will be documented in the next chapter, Research Steps, and in the subsequent four chapters which present the findings and discussions. Here, I turn to portrait as biography to give the reader a better sense of my co-storyers, their identities and

intersections, and how they came into the places in which they now work and reside. These portraits are told in two ways: from my perspective as the portraitist to allow the reader to see how I have come to know Ndindi and Trevor through our shared work, and from their own words, excerpts of how they storied themselves to me in our conversations. Their journeys are inseparable from the epistemologies, thus, as co-storyers of this research, their journeys are necessary elements of our collective research lens.

Ndindi

Ndindi was born in Kenya to a Kamba mother and father and two siblings in a Kamba-speaking household. Kamba people, Ndindi shared with me, are peacemakers, living among many other groups and living an existence of long distance traveling for the last 500 years.

Ndindi further explained that Kamba people have great traditions of medicine, plants, spirituality, healing, peace, and ambassadorship among other people. “We’re just very chill. We love our land. And we’re just trying to mind our business because we have a lot of peace, so we were relied on to have this ambassador role that we’ve held for a long time,” she explained.

“That makes sense”, I thought to myself, recalling the ways that Ndindi has always felt so chill to me, even as she traverses borders of spaces and institutions, intentionally and skillfully challenging systems that don’t work and resolvedly bringing about better alternatives. Ndindi has been accustomed to being othered in many spaces throughout her life. Ndindi explained that in Kenya today, dominant groups look down on Kamba people, characterizing them as ones who practice witchcraft, a perspective shaped by the history of colonization-imposed

christianity in their country. As a native Kamba-speaking child, Ndindi did not learn the dominant languages of English and Kiswahili until later, first learning English when her parents lived in the U.S. for a time while her father obtained a Ph.D. (and her mother a college degree), and then learning Kiswahili in schools when her family returned to Kenya.

For Ndindi's parents to have lived in the U.S. and obtained their degrees, it took significant communal effort, Ndindi explained. Other members of the family sacrificed to make this academic journey possible for her family. In return, Ndindi's family now bears a responsibility to care for the rest of the extended family and to *make something* of the education. Though Ndindi is not a first-generation college or Ph.D. student, the paradigm of her educational opportunities is still vastly different from those of her western peers. For Ndindi, education represents something weighty, collective, and not optional. Furthermore, education represents something she must put to use as tools of transformation to make the lives of others better.

Upon her family's return to Kenya from the United States when Ndindi was seven, they lived in metropolitan Nairobi. In this setting, Ndindi not only attended primary school but also learned the skills needed to navigate urban streets, a part of her identity she now attributes to her adeptness and familiarity in living and educating in the urban context of Los Angeles. Living in Nairobi also exposed Ndindi to a diversity of ethnic groups that would parallel the diverse communities she makes home with now in Los Angeles.

Ndindi storied to me that she has always been a good student, noting "I was just not a

conformist”. Her inherent need to push back on what she perceived as injustices or structures that didn’t make sense, such as physical and group punishment, made her schooling experience “hard” for Ndindi, but she admits that what saved her from having bigger problems with the school was that she was always able to get good grades. She narrated to me how she felt in those times: “How come I don’t get to be a human and just learn? You don’t have to beat me into submission. I actually wanted to learn but I never really felt I belonged there at all.”

Ndindi defined these early experiences in school as informative of how she thinks about democratic and humanizing learning now. Though she continued to struggle to fit into the dominant system, her years in secondary school would help shape Ndindi’s skills of advocacy for herself– skills she has relied on ever since not only in advocating for herself but for many others through her teaching and community work. The secondary school that Ndindi had initially tested into in a different city proved to be so coercive and dehumanizing that it took a toll on her physical health. Determined to escape those conditions while still preserving her opportunity to finish schooling, Ndindi withdrew herself from that school and re-enrolled herself in a school close to home, relying on resourcefulness and determination to convince the institutions to allow the transfer and even negotiating the fees to be affordable for her family. This experience of surfacing resourcefulness where others may only see limitations seems to me to be intricately connected to the work that Ndindi has done in creating Angeles Workshop School, taking huge risks in largely uncharted waters.

In the stories that Ndindi has shared with me about her life, there never seems to be a

time when Ndindi was *not* an activist and educator. Ndindi came to the United States from Kenya to attend college. Because she was limited to attending a college that would grant her a student visa, Ndindi ended up in an evangelical christian college where she experienced significant coercion and suppression, not only around her ideologies and identities including her queerness, but also in her advocacy of those around her who were being mistreated within the university. Because her visa was connected to her enrollment, she was unable to transfer or leave the school. Under these circumstances, Ndindi shared with me, she struggled with a severe eating disorder and mental health concerns, having no structured support to navigate her challenges. Yet, Ndindi's resourcefulness and resolve, along with her intellect and skills in navigating institutions, were once again the capital she used to escape her situation. She managed to graduate with her university degree when she was only 19 years old.

Throughout her time in higher ed in the United States, Ndindi worked in various educational settings, including building her own tutoring business (all undocumented, not having obtained a work permit). Yet, Ndindi had purpose, direction, and natural skills in teaching, so she returned to the same university to obtain a teaching credential and master's, this time clear on how to make the program work for her and remain "completely divested" from the rest of the oppressive institution. Though Ndindi's plan had always been to obtain her education and then return to teach in Kenya, through the course of her two programs, she was becoming increasingly connected with different communities in Los Angeles. From working in a predominantly Black community in Pasadena to a predominantly Korean community in

Cerritos, to more diverse communities in West LA and even Orange County for a time, Ndindi's lived experiences of boundary crossing and adeptly navigating her insider-outsider status came into play as she made herself a part of many circles of people, many communities.

Though she felt confident in herself as a teacher, Ndindi shared with me that she “still had a lot of questions” which led her to enroll in the Ph.D. program at Chapman University. This also helped relieve her problem of having stayed in the U.S. beyond her student visa, essentially living and working as an undocumented immigrant. Her time at Chapman, Ndindi told me, “was a good place to figure out that I really wanted to divest from public school education”. She had begun teaching at progressively more democratic and “radical” schools, but even in these settings, Ndindi held a sense that something more could be done in creating an educational model and space that allowed students to truly be their authentic selves and to participate in democratic, humanizing education while engaging in radical curriculum for social change.

Having met her partner Scott teaching together in a small progressive school in West Los Angeles, Ndindi found herself having discussions with Scott, her students, and their parents about what more they all wanted from education and school. This communal dialogue eventually birthed their own revolutionary micro-school, as Ndindi and Scott call it, both resigning from their previous school to start Angeles Workshop School in 2005.

Trevor

In the summer of 2021, as we prepared for my visit to Hālau Kū Māna over a video call,

Trevor shared with me that he had just learned some big news about his ancestry. His expression showed me he was still processing the news and there was a lot of feeling under the surface. He had grown up believing he was mostly white with some Japanese and Spanish ancestry. He explained that his mother's family is from the United States of Eastern European ancestry. While Trevor's father was from Hawai'i, thus having a mixed heritage that is common across the Hawaiian Islands. Trevor's paternal grandmother was German and Japanese. His paternal grandfather, they had always been told, was born into one of the few non-Hawaiian families, of British ancestry, to have lived on the island of Hawai'i since Kingdom times as Hawaiian nationals. The big news Trevor had just learned was that his grandfather was not biologically born into that family, but rather he had been adopted from his Portuguese Hawaiian parents and raised with his adoption kept a secret.

As someone who had lived in Hawai'i his whole life as a "white man", Trevor carried the belief that though Hawai'i was home to Trevor and his ancestors for generations, this is not his ancestral lands or birthright. Thus, this news of having Hawaiian blood was profound for Trevor. He admitted to me in that conversation and in later ones that he was still trying to wrap his mind around what it meant. Though there was a sense of groundedness in this news, confirming his internal sense that Hawai'i *really* was home for him, he also weighed this information with his lived experiences as a white-passing man—an identity that shaped his relationships with self, place, and others throughout his life, even as he became embedded in the Hālau Kū Māna and wider Hawaiian community.

Though he had grown up “white,” his life was divergent (a thread of similarity among our three stories) from other white families and much of society. Trevor told me that he grew up as “the poorest person he knew”. His family’s profession was to forage and cultivate Indigenous plants to sell in their nursery, a business born out of Trevor’s mother’s passion for natural sciences. Trevor’s father, though unaware of his true Hawaiian heritage, was always passionate about Hawaiian rights and proud of his status as a Hawaiian national. His adopted family had land on the big island that was home to one of King Kamehameha’s *lo’i*, a traditional taro patch. Taro is not only a food staple in Hawai’i but a sacred plant regarded as the first sibling of all Hawaiian people. Trevor’s passion for plants, place, and Hawai’i is evident in almost every way—he shared with me that one of his dreams had been to go back to that family land, build a Hawaiian school on it, and care for King Kamehameha’s *lo’i*.

Trevor, like Ndindi, excelled in school and his love for learning was his escape from the other ways in which he felt like he did not belong. He attended schools that were predominantly Japanese and middle-class. He told me he was always hyper-aware of the whiteness of other kids in the school, though there were not many of them, and wanted to make sure he wasn’t “like them”. Trevor also shared with me that growing up with parents who send you out every day to forage for plants, often trespassing on property to procure cuttings, “it is hard to be made to follow the rules”. Though he did not care much to adhere to the structures of school, Trevor found a passion in student government. His involvement with student government shapes his teacher identity today, as he has brought student government to Hālau Kū Māna and

continuously looks for opportunities to make political change with his students, within and without the classroom.

Trevor attended college in Oregon where he was a member of the Hawaiian club (where he met his partner, Kira) and was active in organizing with the university's BSU and Mecha clubs. His college experiences further shaped his lens of social justice. Though he had majored in volcanology with aspirations of being a cutting-edge volcano scientist, Trevor returned to Hawaii and directed his efforts into journalism and education, drawing from his passion for sharing knowledge and wanting to make social change, particularly for the Hawaiian kingdom. Trevor describes his teacher prep program as standard, dominant schooling that did not really prepare people to be good teachers. Trevor was already interested in exploring alternative schooling models when he conducted his master's research on the Hawaiian Public Charter schools, at the time aspiring to make his own school one day. Trevor shared with me that what he learned from that research process, however, was that he was not qualified to open his own school.

That study did connect him to Hālau Kū Māna, although they were the only school that did not return his calls to be a part of his study, Trevor told me chuckling. When he got hired at the school 15 years ago, Hālau Kū Māna was in desperate need of qualified math and science teachers. Trevor, along with his partner Kira, would make their home within biking distance from the school and eventually have two children. Trevor threw himself fully into his role in the school and Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua (2013), one of the founders, turned to Trevor for his story

in her narrative research on the school. In her book, Trevor is an example of how a white teacher could learn with respect and devotion the culture, language, and interests of the Hawaiian community while being mindful of his place.

As a part of her book, Trevor stories how he was tested by the Hawaiian students at first and had to earn their trust. Noelani's conversations with Trevor surface their understanding of *kuleana*, responsibility to their place and community, and how it is directly related to genealogy. Trevor spoke with clarity that as someone without genealogy and only a 4-generation connection to this land, he must stand at the back of the line behind all those whose genealogy connects them here for thousands of years (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2013). As my journey with Trevor was starting, he was doing the work to reorient himself and situate his speaking within that millennia-long genealogy that he had previously not been able to claim. Our walking together in conversation also marks another transition for Trevor, from the island of O'ahu where he has lived and taught at Hālau Kū Māna for the past 15 years, back to his home island of Hawai'i (Big Island).

Whereas Trevor had felt unready and unqualified to begin his own school after finishing his master's program, now Trevor is considering again the possibility. With more years of experience, with further invitation and asking from the community, with a deeper realization that something is always needed to exist "on the tip of the spear" as Trevor calls it, to move all other work along the spectrum of progress, and with his new understanding of his genealogy and *kuleana*, Trevor shared with me that now may be the time for him to do that work of

creating alternative schools as he returns to and grows community on the Big Island.

Story as Relationship: Weaving Together Understanding & Journey

The more I have gotten to know Trevor and Ndindi, the more I am affirmed by the meaning behind connection; beyond affinity, there is a spiritual and purpose-filled sense behind our coming together to make sense of our stories, our contexts, and discuss what this means for us next. Ndindi said, “You know, even this connection between me you, and Trevor really kind of confirms to me that we’re not alone. There are many people who really don’t want dehumanizing things. And there’s got to be better ways for us to get together so that there are no more 12-year-olds who are lonely, who don’t know that there’s a place for them” (28). Though our contexts, identities, and stories are different, this study documents how Trevor, Ndindi, and I constructed our aggregated lens, drawing together our similar convictions that there is a particular need for educational work to be done in the margins, at the grassroots, “at the tip of the spear”. We come together to complicate and challenge each other’s prior notions, expanding each other’s perspectives, but also drawing together that which is familiar and similar, as it informs us of a possibility to be less alone in what we do. As a newcomer to creating and sustaining alternative-autonomous schools, my role in the conversation is to listen carefully, yet also to inquire and notice, to “make the familiar strange” so that in my sharing of their stories of radical schooling, we can collectively make the strange familiar (Mannay, 2010).

Chapter 5–Research Steps: Walking Together

This chapter serves as a continuation of Chapter 4- Methodology and it documents the processes of generating data, data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings and discussions. Additionally, this chapter documents the effects of the COVID pandemic which punctuated my dissertation process. My doctoral process spans six years, two babies, and two years of a global pandemic. From the time in which I completed my qualifying exams and received IRB approval in 2019 to when I conducted my data collection and dissertation writing in 2021-2022, significant changes occurred in the world around us, having an inevitable impact on my research itself. The previous Intro, Theory, Literature Review, and Methodology chapters of my dissertation have been rewritten to reflect these changes, while this chapter, relying more visibly on autoethnographic storytelling, narrates how I experienced some of those changes and what steps I and my co-storyers took to carry out this study.

Conceptions: Co-Imagining Meaningful & Reciprocal Inquiry

Throughout the course of designing research, even as I was meeting and connecting to my co-storyers, Ndindi and Trevor, I thought carefully about what methods of research would best lend itself to authenticity and anti-coloniality. I was concerned with the power dynamics in working with students, especially those I had limited familiarity with. I was probably most concerned with whose voice would be telling the story and who got to decide what stories would be told and how they would be told. These concerns along with my growing knowledge and interest in participant visual media, led me to conceive of a project involving collaborative film.

This thought was brought up in conversation with Ndindi, Scott, Trevor, and their students and was always met with a warm reception. The tricky part would be detailing a plan in which doing this project was manageable within the limits of a school day with an already full workload. I knew I had to make this meaningful, doable, and not a great burden of time or energy for the participants. When I had come up with my plan and my participant communities gave positive feedback for it, I submitted it to IRB in February 2020 and my research design passed the board of review, qualifying it as ethical proposed research. The concerns I may have had about validity and ethics in my research design were, in many ways, alleviated by this IRB approval and I began to schedule with Ndindi and Trevor (and a couple of other participating schools who had volunteered to be a part of the study prior to the pandemic) to visit their school sites and collect data through the remainder of 2020.

Waiting: A Pandemic Year, Meaningful Pause, & Practice of Slowing Down

In March after my IRB had been accepted and I was in communication with my participant sites (4 schools at that time) to receive final consent and arrange a timeline for visits, the entire world received notice of the global COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shut down. As those initial frenzied weeks settled into a realization that all of this was not going to “be over” any time soon, the conversations began, on many layers with many people, about how to pick up the pieces and move forward in uncertain times with new protocol.

Many in my position in academia who were expecting to complete their studies and graduate the following year but had yet to gather their data, began to pivot to online studies,

using video call tools to interact with participants. In some conversations, I was even asked to consider changing my study altogether. I felt compelled to resist, not because I was not accustomed to pivoting or because I was unwilling to accept our new reality and let go of old plans. What was anchoring me in my original study was my relationship to my participants, their eagerness to do this thing we had co-constructed as proposed research, and the history of the walk that had brought me to this point. It did not feel right to abandon that path hastily.

This pandemic pause coincidentally paralleled my second (and intentionally last) pregnancy. My pregnancy became a buffer to the outside world who seemed to grant me pause for maternity-related reasons more readily than the reasons I was having trouble articulating related to my research and the relationships within it. During this year off, I grew and settled into myself in many ways—a part I would come to learn was invaluable to my journey.

Embracing a pedagogy of pause that Eve Tuck spoke about in her foreword to Leigh Patel's *Decolonizing Educational Research* (2019), I journaled about this time the following year next year:

I took two consecutive semester-long leave of absences due to the inability to collect data in schools as we journeyed through the COVID-19 shut down. At the same time, I grew my second child in my womb. She was born in October 2020. Xolani Ke'obi Hardy, embodiment of prayers and healing. My time away from my dissertation was not due to her; I insisted to myself my work had stopped only because of the pandemic. I had mourned the loss of the opportunity to be a scholar in full force while carrying her, believing it would be some kind of gift I could pass to her as a radical mother doing all the things. Thank goodness, COVID. Thank goodness my baby gestated while I spent days for the first time in my adult life in a new pause. In this pause, I came to know my home,

spending each day in our spaces, our garden, making more home out of a dwelling I had been in and out of for 3 years. In this pause, I came to know my hands, I learned to sew, to craft clothes, to cook, to grow food, to create home from space. My daughter was born into this home and into the place in which her mother was embodied, for once, in pause, in rest, in creation, in balance. Thank goodness, Xolani.

My dissertation entered my mind and left, always a sense accompanying it of “not now, not yet”. I had no anxiety, no rush. The academy, as tool and product of capitalism, warps our minds to believe that our time and selves are scarce. In this state of stress and disconnection, we conform to the rules of materiality, necessary to dehumanize us enough to remain drivers of capitalism. Outside of this dysfunction, the systems of nature exist in timeless rhythms. Time and self can never be a scarce resource when we are both branch and tree of the endless webs of everything. You, academic reader, may not understand me yet. But within your consciousness is the blueprint to this story I poem. This everythingness. What does this have to do with my dissertation, my research? Because as forbidden as the academy may make it, the uncovering of truth is within the flows of everythingness...

In the first year of the pandemic, I grew and delivered my daughter. I would learn of my father’s lung cancer and bring my family back to our home in Taiwan to care for my father during his chemotherapy. I taught throughout the 2020-21 school year via distance learning, a shared journey of uncharted waters that many in educational communities navigated and struggled through together, yet in much isolation. During the second semester of that year, I eventually redesigned my study to be conducted in a distanced way, using video call and Google tools. I reached out to the Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop communities to see if anyone would

be interested in participating in this way. I received one response for an interview, from Jo, a graduate of Angeles Workshop Project. I video chatted with them during the pre-daylight hours from my quarantine house in Taiwan.

Though that conversation encouraged my heart about the potential for connection and collective meaning-making through these types of conversations, the lack of interest or ability to commit to participation by other folks in those communities also made much sense to me. In the middle of a global pandemic, sitting on the computer for any more minutes than necessary, much less for an extracurricular activity such as someone else's research, was beyond most folks' realm of possibility and well-being. Their silence deepened my pause; I would be at peace about it as I cared for my own family at the edges of my capacity during those times.

Summer of 2021 came and remembering the reasons behind my pause, I checked back in with the co-participant relationships that meant so much to me. I emailed Ndindi and Trevor to see how they were holding up through all the change. In those emails, eventually both Trevor and Ndindi would extend an invitation to me once again to join them in their in-person classroom learning scheduled to take place that fall semester, and to figure out something I could use as data. They too had some sense of relational responsibility to me, I felt in their responses. As they returned to a new post-pandemic routine of schooling with many new protocols, they welcomed me to share some time within these new settings and help them make sense of it all.

So, I began to make arrangements to visit in person for the fall semester of 2021, this

time a new research design held together loosely by our shared new reality of uncertainty and changing mandates every few days or weeks. All I knew is that these folks cared for me, and I was honored to be in their presence. The “research” would have to be whatever it would be. My priority now, more than ever, was to take utmost care of all those involved (at the expense of any previously proposed research designs).

I knew that teachers and students would be navigating many different new protocols and anxieties that the COVID-19 pandemic had brought into our life. Among other things, COVID testing, quarantining, recovering from vaccinations, debates about whether to vaccinate, caring for sick loved ones, and even grieving lost loved ones were now a part of the ongoing struggle to navigate this new world together. In addition, teachers and students had not been in school in person for over a year and for many of our students going into their second pandemic year of school was bringing its own set of social and academic fatigue, anxiety, and disconnection.

Within this context, I had no desire to ask for any further participation. For students to learn to trust me enough to engage in research with me, if they were even on campus in the first place, seemed delusional and unethical. In the past, I had always regarded research that relies on researcher observation and narration of events seemed colonial and trivializing of participant voice. Now, the idea of being a “fly on the wall” and asking the least of my participants as possible began to feel like the most gentle and humane way I could approach this project. My anxieties about my voice and ability to tell their stories authentically took a backseat

as I turned my attention to practical matters of how I could enter their spaces as safely as possible and make this process as easy for them as possible. I opened my heart to whatever form of research would emerge from these communities in such unknown times.

I sat deeply with the invitations I had received from Trevor and Ndindi and tried to make sense of what it meant and how I could honor them. The only thing that seemed to hold any steadfastness was this sense of relationality I had with them. Amidst all uncertainty, I still sensed a growing friendship with these two colleagues from whom I still had so much to learn.

As I quarantined for a week in my parents in law's house in O'ahu, in September of 2021, preceding my data collection time with Hālau Kū Māna, I received news that the school would be sending students back to distance learning as COVID cases were rising on the island. I was here on the island for a month, ready to do my cross-sectional participant research, yet there would be no students, no families, and quarantine protocol limiting staff to their own classrooms. Under these circumstances, did I have a right to even enter campus? Was my being here the right thing to do? Over email, Trevor continued to extend his invitation to me to at least come see the school and sit in as he taught his classes from his classroom via video call to his students in their homes. After a week of quarantine and receiving negative COVID test results, I would make my way to Hālau Kū Māna for the first time to meet Trevor on a student-less campus.

The pandemic upended our conceptions of regular activities, many of which are rooted in colonial traditions. For this I am grateful. I am so grateful my time of research never had the

opportunity to exist under normal pretense of what research used to be. It prepared me, a non-Indigenous researcher, to enter a sacred space, humbled and open, without any sense of the research itself being more important than the people I would be meeting and talking to and making relationships with. Co-creation was a necessity beyond intention. When the possibility of meeting again tomorrow was never taken for granted, each day's conversations and seeing were a gift that could never have been contrived.

Invitation & Consent: An Unfinished Work

Trevor's invitation to me via email was only to visit for two days in mid-September of 2021. Though I knew this was not enough time for me to do in depth research, I also knew that I was at no point entitled to more time than offered. I wanted to make sure that in the two days given, I took care to connect as authentically as possible and to see what more my time in O'ahu could become if more trust and interest grew from our interactions in those first two days.

Receiving invitation and consent is therefore an unfinished work. Within our conversations in those first two days, I began to share with Trevor my emerging ideas for what research could be within this new context. At first, Trevor was uncomfortable with the prospect of himself as a key informant to my research. He felt that he was not the most important person at the school, and he saw himself as somewhat of "a historian" for the school. The idea that I would focus on his personal experience within Hālau Kū Māna, made him feel that I would lose out some of the importance or the authenticity of the school's story. His reluctance caused me to question my direction. Authenticity was important to me, so I understood where Trevor was

coming from. However, I knew that I was facing physical limitations due to COVID, including the lack of folks I could safely interact with during my time in O'ahu, as well as the limitations that doing a distanced, video-call data collection method had already presented to me for the past year.

Within that context, I assured Trevor that my intention was still to focus on a version of my original research questions, focusing on the story of the school and its existence and relationship with its community. Trevor's voice and life history would be the instrument through which that story was presented to me since I was in closest relationship with him. Given the circumstances, this was the most authentic way I could conceive of gathering this story and learning anything here related to my questions. I explained to Trevor, that because my time to be physically present at the school was now much more limited than before, and because I wouldn't be able to safely interact with and form trusting relationships with a good cross-section of the Hālau Kū Māna community, I felt that an attempt to present a story of the school as though it had emerged from the greater school community felt inauthentic, and that if I only tried to present my learnings from my own observational perspective, it would feel too skewed, uniformed, and limited. I also told Trevor that he would have freedom to guide, alter, and construct the story with me. If at any point, he felt this method was not meaningful, we would stop or adjust. Additionally, I suggested that we invite in a few key people to the conversation at points in which it felt necessary. Since there were several of his former students and colleagues on campus, I asked him to consider if having their voices augment his would

help him feel as though the story would be more authentic and balanced. To all of this, Trevor agreed, and we would spend the next 2.5 weeks co-constructing the data together.

Our conversations were loosely structured. The first few days, it felt important to develop a better understanding of one another and we exchanged life stories of family, culture, and teaching. Our conversations were woven into the socially distant school day, which gave us more time to talk because there were chunks of the day in which students would normally be working with Trevor outside, yet in the distance model, they were instructed to do an activity in their own yard or outdoors near their home and then report it online. This freed up Trevor to spend more time with me. Over time, I began to generate more questions from the stories and talks that we had previously had. Much of our conversations did not feel like an interview, but rather just two people exchanging ideas and lived experiences, often interjecting or meandering off topic. I often would check back in with Trevor to see what portions of the conversation were ok “for share” or he would proactively tell me what was “not for share” before beginning a story that was spoken in confidence. Navigating this consent was much more relational and intuitive than having my participant sign a single consent form at the beginning of the research process with the limited list of questions that would be asked and would not be deviated from in data collection. Rather, by allowing consent to be an unfinished work, it allowed stories to emerge more naturally and more meaningfully to us as co-participants and co-constructors of the story.

Because I spent time researching with Trevor at Hālau Kū Māna before visiting Ndindi and Angeles Workshop School, my time in O’ahu greatly shaped the study and how I would

gather data and structure my time in Los Angeles. However, it was still important to me that I remain open and responsive to the context and needs of Ndindi and all the other folks who make up Angeles Workshop School.

Whereas Hālau Kū Māna had been without students physically on campus or only a few at a time for intervention schooling, Angeles Workshop School was in full attendance during my time of visit. This meant that I needed to be even more unobtrusive during classes, especially as I was a true outsider for the students, and had not received personal, formal consent from their guardians to record their voice or likeness. However, the parents had been communicated with by Ndindi and Scott of my presence as a researcher-observer in the school during that week and they had granted passive consent for this process. Ndindi and Scott also had received media consent forms from all the guardians of their students to have their students' pictures and videos taken during class and used for the purpose of the school. Ndindi and Scott also assured me that the students were familiar with the research process and were accustomed to advocating for themselves if they were uncomfortable with any process. I navigated the topic of consent with the students throughout my time at Angeles Workshop School, by verbally asking them if it was ok for me to join in their class, to sit near them, to ask some questions, to have my voice recorder on, and to watch what they were doing. I was granted verbal consent, or a head nod, from each student each time I asked.

Some of the students remembered me from my visit as an Expert Enthusiast speaker on Hakka culture from before the pandemic shut down and the day that Michael and I spent

accompanying them on a hike and letting the students play around with our go pros. Ndindi and some of the students shared that they had been also fairly accustomed to having visitors in the past and had even had a Ph.D. student spend an entire year conducting his research with the school. This was reassuring to me, yet I still was sensitive to the fact that students were still adjusting to in-person schooling in a pandemic, that there had been a great turn over so many of the students were new, and that because the nature of my research design had shifted to focus more on Ndindi's experience, I would be having less time to build relationships with the students themselves.

Because learning time felt more structured at Angeles Workshop School with all the students present than it had felt at Hālau Kū Māna in their hybrid distance model, I felt more cognizant not to take Ndindi's time in excess. Whereas Trevor and I had co-constructed much of the conversation by organically exploring different topics over a more extended amount of time, I felt a responsibility to Ndindi to condense this process by briefly sharing with her some of the themes that had emerged in my conversations with Trevor and then bringing forth questions and prompts to help elicit her story around those themes from multiple angles.

Throughout this process, I still needed to check in with Ndindi and see if she found this work meaningful and authentic to her and her school. I still needed to obtain consent and input from her for this new research direction. I shared with her briefly about my experiences with Trevor at Hālau Kū Māna and how the research had begun to take form through my observation of his classes, limited participation in activities with students, and mainly through informally

structured conversations throughout my visit there over the course of three weeks. I shared with her about the research taking the form of a portrait and collective autoethnography with a single author and three voices, and how I viewed each of our stories and lived experiences as instruments to tell of the existence and meaning of these schools. Ndindi agreed to this direction, and we loosely planned on when we could fit our conversations into the school day over the next two weeks.

Walking Together: Generating, Sharing, & Collecting Data

For my co-storyers to truly trust me and get to know me, I sought invitation to spend a prolonged time (Creswell, 1998) within their schools, giving ample time to allow their stories to emerge and for me to observe them within the day-to-day proceedings of their learning spaces. By spending entire days (extending beyond the hours of the school day), this allowed for an open, reciprocal dialogue to take place in which we mutually examined the alignment of research interests and communal vision. Once welcomed to these places, paying careful attention to the ritual of encounters and the building of relationships and trust (Berryman et al, 2013), I spent between 2-4 weeks in data collection with each site, being mindful of not over-burdening a site with the presence of an outside researcher (Root, 2010). It was important that I honored the voice of each place in how to enter their ecosystem, how to work, live and be while I was there, and how to transition out of being physically in their world, hoping to preserve communion with them once we depart. To become a member of the learning environment, I participated in the everyday activities of each school, living the story we created, as Clandinin

and Connelly (2000) describe is essential to narrative research. In this way, I also remained sensitive to the task of navigating insider-outsider tension, establishing trust with participants on many levels (Berryman et al, 2013). In this way, we were able to engage in deep conversations and tell critical stories to one another, as Freire (1970) urges us to do, about our learning experiences and how they connect to our lives and futures in this world.

Time spent within each site included participant-observation through the school day (Bailey, 2007). I scattered and planned my visits around seeing a diversity of activity at each site, including learning within classes, field trips, community work, staff planning times, meals, working the land, informal interactions, project-based learning, and presentations and sharing of learning and student work. I also spent time in informal and semi-structured small groups and one-on-one conversations with students, staff, and graduates at each site. In this time of participating, living, and storying, I employed tools of qualitative research such as observation, participation-observation, recorded dialogue, fieldnotes, and researchers' journals (Bailey, 2007) to document my experiences of these learning places. With the intent of aggregating our stories in the most authentic and meaningful ways possible, my co-storyers and I kept in mind that creativity and imagination are necessary parts of qualitative research (Carol Bailey, 2007).

The bulk of data was gathered via recorded conversations. I had initially asked Ndindi and Trevor for their consent to record with my phone as an ongoing practice whenever I was having conversations with them. I had also initially asked for their consent to take pictures to

help me remember as a reference for describing the settings. I would try to indicate to them whenever I was recording, especially as we would sit down to have a more formal conversation. I would sometimes remind them that if they wanted anything off record, I could stop recording as well. While I tried to be as natural and present in these conversations as possible, I would sometimes have my journal in front of me to jot down brief notes to remember later. The bulk of recorded data was recorded on my phone's voice recorder app and the Otter app, which also transcribes as it records.

In addition to the conversations, I was able to observe and participate in several days of activity at each school. During classroom observations, I took notes on my computer or tablet to record the setting, the lessons, the interactions, some of the dialogue that stood out to me, as well as my initial reactions, realizations or analysis that may have come up in the moment. During more active participation, such as on hikes, field trips, cutting down vines at Hālau Kū Māna, or flying model planes at Angeles Workshop School, to be fully present and participatory, I did not take notes. But if the opportunity arose, I tried to snap a few quick pictures or videos just to remember the activity. I would then journal about it at a later time.

My researcher's journal has been a catch all place for my thoughts, observations, memories, initial analyses, conversations with text, and way to process my feelings and realizations as I go through this journey. Rather than having it organized into different types of memos, my researcher's journal is only organized chronologically, recording the day and location of each entry. The entries can vary from a detailed essay to short jottings, to lists and

initial attempts to sort information and themes.

Finally, my data includes the physical and digital items that each school has shared with me, such as websites, schedules, pamphlets, photos, worksheets, fliers, and letters. I regard these items as gifts that are instruments to help tell the collective story. Additional artifacts that make their way into the data and findings may include public-access artifacts such as demographic or geographic data or previous publications about each of these schools. I relied considerably on the text *The Seeds We Planted: Portraits of a Native Hawaiian Charter School* for the context of Hālau Kū Māna because its history extends into the 90's and pre-dates Trevor's time at the school. I also draw context from two published texts which Ndindi shared with me, "Angeles Workshop School: An Experiment in Student Voice" (Kitonga, 2019) and a dissertation study that had been conducted with them by Danovitch in 2018.

Engaging with Data: Listening & Considering

By the beginning of November 2021, I had completed the bulk of my data collection with Ndindi at Angeles Workshop School and with Trevor at Hālau Kū Māna. I moved into the data analysis phase of the research. My first pass through the data was concurrent with my transcription process. Since I had used the digital tool, Otter, to record or transcribe my uploaded audio files, I had a rough transcription of each recording. However, each transcript needed to be edited significantly, and speaker names needed to be added throughout. I listened closely to each audio file and made the necessary additions and changes to the transcript. As I listened, I also kept track of initial notes and codes as I worked with the recordings in chunks. I

documented these first notations in an excel file that would track each chunk, the speaker, the audio file, the location, and the first impression note.

Once I had completed this process with all 36 hours of recorded data, I proceeded to a second interaction of first round coding within the excel file. This involved me grouping the initial notes I had made into various lists of possible themes and codes and assigning these codes to each chunked quote in a new column. Eclectic coding allowed for the emergence of best coding methods in response to participants at each site (Saldana, 2016). In consultation with participants, I coded data with *in vivo* coding to honor the participants voices (Saldana, 2016, p. 71). I also used emotion coding, thematic coding and descriptive coding to allow for a rich description and multiple perspectives to emerge from the data. I coded my field notes and researcher journals daily using descriptive and emotion coding. Throughout the analysis process, there was sustained dialogue with co-storyers to member-check coding and organize coding in a coherent and authentic way.

For the next round of coding, I would sort the excel file by the codes I had made in the last round. I then worked to shorten my codes list and see what main themes were emerging from the data. I then entered a theme code into a new column. This process of generating and applying codes was both relational and introspective for me. Many of the codes were *in vivo*, direct quotes that had continued to ring in my heart since I first heard them or had jumped out to me again as I transcribed. Many of the codes were intricately tied to my own lens and ways in which I had experienced these stories and memories. Some of the codes I recognized were

influenced by the literature I have been steeped in throughout this research process– what I think *those* scholars might have to say about this.

The process of coding took more time than I would have anticipated. I was not surprised by the bulk of the work. I was surprised by how much this dialogue with the data caused me to pause and question what I was seeing. This pausing and deep consideration pushed me to understand that research is what we make it. It is not just living through the conversations and moments. It is not just recording the conversations and moments and putting it on paper. It is not arbitrarily assigning already-accepted theories and synthesizing it with the texts we've generated. Rather, it is a dynamic conversation and relationship, with humans, with text, with sound, with sight, with units of meaning, places of meaning, and images of meaning. It is a verb in which we attempt to make ourselves real and understood, to ourselves first, and then possibly to others.

Analysis as Communion: Conversation, Reflection, and Coming Together

In sustained dialogue, initial findings emerged and were discussed among us during the data collection phase of research, as stories were being collected and told. This co-reflection and analysis of our experience and testimonies shaped future conversations and the lenses through which I examined the stories during the analysis and writing phases of this research.

After several iterations of first and second round coding, though I was seeing some themes emerge, I began to feel somewhat disconnected from the overall picture, as I had been working with the data only in smaller chunks for several weeks. I returned to my completed

transcripts and began to read through them more holistically to remind myself of my lived experience and the contexts in which these various conversations had emerged. I also arranged to have a follow up conversation with Ndindi and Trevor together over video call, our first talk as a trio. In this conversation, I presented to them some initial themes that had emerged and asked them a few clarifying questions. I recorded and transcribed this conversation but did not code it. I also had a conversation with my adviser, Lilia, to talk through emergent themes. After these two conversations, I committed to a title for my dissertation, and to four major themes which would become a separate chapter in my findings.

My next step was to organize my findings. I did so by creating a detailed outline under each of my four main themes. I created this outline intuitively using my understanding of the emergent findings at that time and how I saw them fitting together to support each major theme. I conducted one more pass-through of all my transcripts, using the previous rounds of coding to guide this process, to copy and paste chunks of the data into each outline section that it best supported. This process served to help me refine and change my outline, and thus the format to which I would present my findings. Once I had a detailed outline, with some corresponding support from the data, I sent what I had to Ndindi and Trevor for member-checking. They both gave me their approval for the themes I had selected and how I had organized the findings. Throughout the writing process, I gave them a chance to check-in, to approve my writing, and to share their preference with me about the presentation.

Storying the Findings: Channeling Learnings as Art & Science

Though I am the single author of this dissertation, my findings are carried greatly by the stories and truths that Ndindi and Trevor as my co-storyers and informants have lived and gathered. This is a precarious position to be in, as the risk of over-shadowing their voices with my own in the writing is ever-present. Another significant layer to this data and to the findings exists, however, in a collective space—in the meaning we have constructed together in conversation. The challenge for me in creating a tangible presentation of the findings was to strike a balance between our individual stories and experiences, told through my voice or curated through my editing, and our collective sense-making which again relied primarily on my analysis, theming, or even guiding the questions and interactions which elicited the data. Through my selected methodologies, I have sought the most authentic ways to represent what is not my story or my knowledge, to honor that which remains theirs and that of their communities, along with what has become mine through my lived experiences *with them* and my internal conversations of sense-making through this process.

In dialogue with the co-storyers and with my committee chair, I began to construct a sense of organization around the emergent themes from the data. Four major themes emerged from the findings; each theme would be written into its own chapter. From a detailed outline for each chapter, I first sought out specific pieces of dialogue and conversation with my co-storyers from the transcripts and organized these pieces into the outline section they best supported and illustrated. From there, I wrote *around* the data, switching between an academic

voice of analysis and discussion to a voice of auto-ethnographic reflection and storying to fold in my internalized learnings and to position myself within the frame of the picture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I also made aesthetic and constructivist decisions around keeping dialogue whole or replacing it with portraiture and storywork told from my perspective. I did this with a sensitivity to centering my co-storyers voices while making the chapters readable for an audience. Finally, as the findings and analytical discussions are blurred in each of the four thematic chapters, I returned to add in the supporting theories that aided in my seeing and illustrating the portrait as research.

Summary

Though this research has emerged in circumstances none of us could have foreseen, I believe that the uncertainty that was so up front for most of us in the past 2 years underscores the qualities and the intentions that critical research aims for. The COVID pandemic, along with other social and cultural conditions—political unease, climate crisis, health crisis, economic strain, material and labor shortages, a global shift in educational and professional paradigms—all contribute to a growing collective sense of instability in the hegemonic structures that have felt ubiquitous for so many generations. For critical scholars, this context is ripe for critical research. The demand for explanation and direction is greater than ever before, reaching far beyond the parameters of the academy which has historically existed as an ivory tower. Thus, making our research accessible, timely, and relevant is more crucial than ever. Furthermore, more than ever, people are abandoning trust in voices from the top and

looking to voices from the grassroots, from within their own communities of place, culture, or affinity, to guide future action and collective and critical reinvention of the world.

Portrait II–Where the Story Takes Place

Portraits of Place

This study emerges from two different schools of two different communities in two different places in the world. Context matters deeply. All the findings and discussions are grounded in my getting to know these places and in my co-storyer's experiences grounded in place. In this chapter I present photograph and portrait to briefly introduce you to these places, giving you a sense of the contexts from which our storied study is constructed.

Again, I remind the reader to consider along with me how we can approach research in ways that subvert colonizing traditions. Much of our research studies in educational fields or done with schools include sections on the demographic information of the schools, an attempt to contextualize the data within statistical information. Even in qualitative research, this practice is common. This portrait chapter is a brief overview of the “schools”, it is grounded in place as the convergence of space, land, and human place-making (Styres, 2017). However, I do not choose brevity or foregrounding statistical information for context, for a few key reasons.

Firstly, statistics and “demographics” have often been weaponized as a colonizing tool against marginalized communities, invoking such traumatic forms of oppression as the one-drop rule to vilify the Black identity and blood quantum to erase the native identity (Monzó, 2019). Additionally, the parceling of information outside of story and relationship is characteristic of colonizing knowledge systems, which often feel inauthentic and dehumanizing for colonized-racialized folks. Furthermore, Indigenous and non-western

cultures often have traditions of including essential information woven within the story and many times in allusion and parable (Capra, 1975), bearing an unhurried sense which trusts the intuition and relationship between storyteller and story-receiver (Windchief & San Pedro, 2019).

I have chosen to present my research in this vein. Throughout Chapters 6-10, you will find a sense of the people of these schools as you hear our stories, and you may have questions or want clarity. I am ok with that. I hope you walk with me and with these stories in intuition, in inquiry, and in invited dialogue. Here in Portrait II, I present just a taste of the *places* in which the story takes places; this presentation is through my lens and limited acquaintance as an invited guest to these spaces.

Hālau Kū Māna

Hālau Kū Māna straddles complex intersections of geography and their pedagogy of land is sensitive to and reflective of these intersections. The school resides in a lush, tucked-away pocket of Makiki Valley. On campus, you feel as though you are in a tropical nature preserve. Yet if you follow the main road out of the parking lot, within just a few blocks, you will find yourself in urban residences of grey concrete apartments, and just a mile or so past that you are deposited into the ever-changing downtown Honolulu, developed to cater to tourist and businesspeople demands. If you take that same road out of the school parking lot and wind around the curves up the hill, you find yourself passing gated mansions, almost as though you are driving through Hollywood Hills, built on a slope to give their inhabitants a coveted hillside

view of the verdant Hawaiian mountains, the city sprawl below reaching out to the sea. Yet tucked away along with the school deep in this pocket of the valley, are the homes of the Hawaiian families who have existed in that place since before Kamehameha came and established the kingdom. Their oral stories, *mo'olelo*, trace them back so many generations, some of them consider their first relations as that land itself.

The school consists of five or six portable classroom buildings and a front administration office. Surrounding the classroom buildings are lush trees shading almost every area of campus. The campus parallels a stream and runs into the sloping elevation of valley as it climbs towards mountain. In this space before the mountain edge of campus is a clearing where the hula tent is erected. Past that are the steps of what used to be a *lo'i*, now just open grassy space. From the staff and visitor parking lot, as you make your way past the admin office, you see several large tents erected to the left, the lunch area especially shaded by large trees. Past this in a small square clearing in front of the original classroom buildings is the *ahu*, a shrine constructed with large stones, an altar to the god of the school, Kū. Past the smaller original classrooms are a single file line of the newer portables which all face the stream. Between the stream and the classrooms is a medium-sized clearing with a stone wall-lined garden, tent-covered picnic tables, and grassy space. Beyond these classrooms at the city end of the campus is a large parking lot where the school minibuses are often parked and where parents drop off their kids.

The pictures below (figures 1-6) walk you through the Hālau Kū Māna campus in a

limited perspective. I have chosen photos I took while researching there that represent elements of the campus to me. Keep in mind what exists beyond the frame, and what could exist from someone else's perspective. My hope is that through portrait and photograph, you *construct a sense of place*. Consider the ways in which this place may be different or familiar to the places of your contexts and how this constructs your understandings of the stories which have emerged from this place.



Figure 2-Stream that runs parallel to the school, site of annual stream clean-up



Figure 3-Trevor's classroom with the school garden in front



*Figure 4-Trevor and students gathered in oli circle
by lunch tables under the Ulu tree*



Figure 5-Trevor picking coconut from a tree he planted as a sapling, 15 years ago



Figure 6- Trevor's classroom, my children playing with Trevor's children's toys



Figure 7- Campus nursery, cared for by Trevor and his students

Angeles Workshop School

Angeles Workshop School is located off a major road in Los Angeles, one of those roads with six lanes that is as straight as an arrow from the sprawl of central LA all the way to the sea. The school inhabits a unit in a 1970's office building, long and narrow with a front door that opens into a small, gated patio and a back door that opens into a cramped parking lot that shares space with the apartment buildings that surround it and the doctor's office the school shares a wall with. Every time I drive to campus, I look out for the Hare Krishna temple half a block from the school. If I miss it, I find myself at a Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf at the next intersection, having to circle around a huge LA city block to get back to the school.

There is not much green space. This is LA, land of concrete. But in front of the building, the school has made a garden in a planter box that sits on the sidewalk. Placed against the wall of the building in front of the garden is an industrial metal baker's shelf with a sign that reads "Giving Shelf" often housing various clothing items or other things the Angeles Workshop community have thought their unhoused neighbors may find useful. These neighbors hang out in this space often, having conversation and browsing through the items on the giving shelf, taking what they may need.

Again, these pictures (Figures 7-12), from my limited perspective and selection, give you a small taste of Angeles Workshop School, the space it inhabits, and the *place of meaning* it embodies, constructed by those who inhabit it.



Figure 8- Angeles Workshop School, street view



Figure 9- Scott's Star Wars collection, shelves of art and RPG supplies, and bookshelves of radical literature



Figure 10- School built sidewalk garden and giving shelf for unhoused neighbors



Figure 11- Cutting Hakka Mochi with students in my visit as an expert enthusiast



Figure 12- Local church which collaborates with AWS in community outreach



Figure 13- Students working in Life Skills class on cutting skills with teacher Tiffany

How Story is Grounded in Place

Just as riding the metro for Angeles Workshop School's Thursday city days could not happen in a place without a metro line, Hālau Kū Māna's annual stream clean-up day could not happen in a place without a stream. Place is complex; it is the intersection of land and life, the meaning inscribed on space by collective movements and memory-making. Place can hold meaning that connects us to generations thousands of years ago. Place is also dynamic, writing new stories each moment. To surface the idea of place in our discussions of phenomenon is a complex yet necessary task. As I bring together our collective storying in the following chapters, I hope to do so in a way that authentically honors the places from which these stories were written. I hope to give you, the reader, a sense of place as source and contour of meaning in a way that calls you further into dialogue with the places that shape you and your living and working on earth.

Chapter 6—A Necessary Journey

I have organized my findings into four main themes: A Necessary Journey, School as Communion, A Radical Existence, and Belonging. I present each theme as its own chapter, and each chapter includes both findings and analytic discussion. I have aimed to present the findings grounded in the stories and conversations with my co-storyers², while connecting the themes and hidden threads of meaning that I constructed throughout. Because findings were grounded in relationships formed with the co-storyers and have emerged over many conversations and moments together, some findings and analyses are more difficult to present *in vivo* or linearly; thus, I have organized these findings thematically and in a style which alternates between narrative dialogue centering my co-storyers' voices, portraiture (told in my voice), and academic voice which draws on theory to explain the data. I also examine myself and my experience as an autoethnographic co-subject of this study.

This study is necessarily constructed, yet the goal of my construction is to be rooted in social realities and anchored in the spirit of my co-storyers' words and work. My hope in this presentation is to authentically illustrate our storied learnings and to give you a sense of the story of *school as communion*—schools which function for and by the community (both human and land) and play a role in the community escaping settler-colonial impositions to collectively

² This is the term I am using to refer to Ndindi and Trevor. The terms “participants” and “informants” did not feel sufficient to me or authentic to the relationships formed through this research process and beyond. Though this is a single-authored paper, their stories and input have shaped the lenses by which these findings have been examined and structured. Through the term “co-storyer”, I hope to further center their voices as those who both share testimony and craft how the story is told.

determine better futures for themselves through learning and living in relationship with one another with school as the place of connection. Ndindi and Trevor illuminate these existences and possibilities of *school as communion* with their lives and work as radical educators. My role as researcher, then, has been to absorb impressions, catalyze conversations, channel realizations, intuit meaning and places for further questioning, and to draw together these ways of knowing into an illustrative paper as narrative and discussion. The way I approach this work is often counter to dominant styles of research reporting, and I am intentional in the structures and conventions I aim to disrupt and to which I seek to create and offer more authentic, meaningful, and beautiful alternatives.

Answers to my research questions are embedded throughout the findings chapters. I invite you to consider how the research questions have contributed to these findings, as they answer: *How are decolonizing, place-based, and community-grown learning places created and sustained and what stories would they share about their creation and existence? What theories guide learning and teaching? What epistemologies are embedded in their curriculum and organization? In what ways do these schools benefit their communities, both human and land? Furthermore, how do these school communities remain sustainable and authentic to their visions within the context of dominant settler-state systems?* I invite you to join us in dialogue with these thoughts, conversations, and lived experiences, and to make sense of them in a way that reflects your own contexts and contributes to our connected, collective understandings about furthering education and schooling within our communities.

A Necessary Journey

Before we consider the data concerning schools at the heart of this study, and as we attempt to answer *how* to form such schools or even whether we *should* form such schools, it is important to recognize the *process* by which such a work has been carried out by the people who have gone before us. The process I experienced in doing this research has grounded me on a journey that resists settler-colonial norms. To walk this journey required much learning from those who have gone before, much reckoning with my own settler-colonial conditioning and ego, and deeper trusting of the intuition and spiritual, cultural, rooted-in-place connections within us that I believe preserve our access to that which is authentic and inherently anti-colonial.

This chapter details the process that was shared with me by Trevor and Ndindi, both as anecdotes of their own experiences and as urgings, they make on behalf of their communities to those who would come after them into similar work. Through my time with Trevor and Ndindi, observing their work and engaging in conversation, I began to see similar steps among the paths we have walked as educators, scholars, family members, and community members. Woven throughout our conversations of teaching, community work, and exploring alternatives to dominant versions of education, I found stories about *how* we got to our communities in the first place and *how* we navigated this work in an ongoing way. In all our experiences, there was a sense of movement, not through prescribed steps, but rather in the discovery of stages and practices, some modeled to us by our communities, some we explored intuitively. What

emerged from the data of our shared stories, was a mutual sense of crucial steps that we have needed to take and that we believe others should be aware of as they approach community work in their own contexts. Although the steps I present here are by no means exhaustive or universal, they have been critical to our processes, thus, I am calling these steps *a necessary journey*.

The elements of this journey have played a significant role in how we have approached entrance to new communities, in our working within a community, and in our claiming a sense of belonging within a community. We have needed to explore our place as it relates to Indigeneity and other positionalities, such as ability, language, culture, education, race, class, gender, and sexuality. We also mutually engage in a process of relationship-building that often leads us to grapple deeply within and have complex conversations with ourselves and others. As we each consider our interactions with communities, we question if we are able to do so in reciprocity, a process that, again, involves deep listening and ongoing conversation. For us, this journey required much time in many ways, a process that challenged colonial conceptions of time and productivity. We recognized that growing living things, including authentic relationships, are cultivated slowly and in many stages. In instances when we have been given invitation into a space or to do a work within a community, we have felt the need to respond with gratitude and gravity, acknowledging the invitation as a gift and as a responsibility to serve those we are now connected to in the ways they ask of us.

By Invitation Only

At the end of the data collection process, Ndindi, Trevor, and I came together for one final conversation over video chat, our first conversation as a trio. As inside members of the communities of this study, it was crucial that Ndindi and Trevor gave their input on how the analysis was taking shape. Their voices would ensure authenticity to what I was seeing and continue to extend permission to me to engage with their stories at a deeper level of analysis. I also knew that it would be critical for Ndindi and Trevor to “meet” and speak directly to one another since my research had already brought them into a relationship of co-storying and presiding over the sacred knowledge presented in this study.

I shared with them some early impressions of my findings for their feedback and correction. One question I brought to them was: “Am I hearing a call from both of you for others to consider opening their own schools?” Ndindi and Trevor’s response was clear: *Not necessarily. Who is considering opening a school? Were they invited to do so? If so, by whom?*

This idea of “by invitation only” was described in Chapter 5 in my process of waiting for invitation to enter each of their spaces for research. I narrate my process of waiting as an ongoing, even daily, process carried out by conversation, checking in, slowing down, looking for some sign of further welcoming into a space, an activity, a conversation. Ndindi and Trevor themselves embody this principle of “by invitation only” in their respective spaces. In my own process of research, I developed a deeper understanding of this principle of *invitation* by living with it and answering to it. However, I sensed a gap between my personal experience with

invitation into research and what felt like an immensely larger ask to be invited by communities to create a school, something multidimensional, tangible, and lasting. I needed to talk further with Trevor and Ndindi and ask them to share with me their understandings of invitation.

Our conversation began with honing the language of shared meaning: at the beginning of the conversation, I was using the phrase “called into” interchangeably with “being invited” and Trevor and Ndindi were quick to correct me.

Trevor: “I just feel like I’ve just heard too many white people say, ‘I was called’. I don’t want to word it that way. I think *invited* is more explicit, not *I feel like I was called*. It’s a cop-out way of saying, I was invited by someone other than the people.” (26)

Trevor underscored what was missing when we don’t use the word *invitation*: the source from whom invitation comes. Too often, folks enter spaces in colonizing and inappropriate ways without seeking permission from the people to whom those spaces belong and without attending to the principles that those original people live by. Before we further discuss this principle of invitation, then, we need to establish our understanding of *Indigeneity* and how our positionalities as Indigenous, settler, diasporic, or descendants of enslaved people affect how we come into spaces and take up work in communities. Ndindi defined to us what Indigenous, settler, and diasporic identities are, drawing from her own experience:

Ndindi: “I consider people who are Indigenous to be the original inhabitants of a particular land and space... And then settlers come. I don’t think of colonization as just ideology. It’s actually material things like actual land and actual resources. And then diaspora is people who are scattered from their Indigenous lands. So, I think of myself as

a diasporic African, because I don't live in the land of my people.” (26)

In response to Ndindi, I shared some of my internal questioning and attempts at understanding the terms *Indigenous*, especially in geographic locations such as Los Angeles which include such a mixture of identities:

Joey: “One of the big contrasts I noticed being in Trevor’s space in Hawaii is that there's no question who the Indigenous people of Hawaii are. You can use words like *Kanaka* and then you already know which people you're talking about. That language, that conciseness doesn't exist in spaces like LA. We can acknowledge that this is Tongva land. But when we talk about what it is to acknowledge Indigeneity, it becomes something broader, much more complex, right?

Trevor responded with context on the terminology and other historical attempts to self-identify or give language to Indigenous identities and experiences:

Trevor: “I agree, I think it's a lot more complex. I think American history, the Trail of Tears and Indian Exclusion Act, and all the ways that they moved Native peoples around just made it so much more complicated there. It’s so much simpler here when you make it relative to elsewhere. I wanted to add, that there is controversy right now over whether Hawaiians are Indigenous. Because if we were in the League of Nations, which became the United Nations, if we were at the table, as one of the powerful nations of the world, then how could we possibly ever have been colonized? The word Indigenous has a colonial connotation. So, the folks in Native law are saying, we are not Indigenous, we are occupied. The more proper word would be aboriginal. But a lot of the momentum in the movement is in the word Indigenous and there's so much shared when we identify as Indigenous with all of the other Indigenous peoples of the world. That would be lost if we were to step out of that circle and be like, well actually, we're Aboriginal, we're not

Indigenous. And so, I would say there's a majority of folks willing to just stick with the term." (26)

Trevor's comments revealed to me that native communities may feel tension when seeking to language their common experiences as original peoples of the world yet living with the pressures of terming the histories and subsequent relationships forced on them by colonizing, occupying, and otherwise oppressive actions of imperialist nations.

Ndindi added next about the complexities within the Black diasporic story, especially for those whose ancestors were brought here as enslaved people.

Ndindi: "I think that question for me with Indigeneity and diasporic folks, is really tricky, because I think Black people occupy a very interesting and unique place, but specifically African Americans and even across Latin America. You're not the original inhabitants of the land, but you were brought here and enslaved on it and then produced for a very long time. There would not be a United States empire, we know, but for enslaved labor and the serious mistreatment, and genocide of Indigenous folks. And so, I think because those folks occupy a very interesting kind of landscape, for a lot of Black Americans, like in Los Angeles, I was like, how come we're not part of this conversation? And not only that, but there are also a lot of traditions from like Black feminism and other places that are very specifically non-western about sustainability. About connection. And I think somehow, African Americans specifically also kind of share in this heritage that we're talking about—how they participate whatever that means. I think that's ongoing. But I have a really difficult time with people telling me that Black folks in this country are settlers, that's bizarre to me." (26)

Ndindi underscored just how complex notions of land, belonging, and Indigeneity have become within this globalized context of historical colonialism. Black descendants of those enslaved and

brought to the Americas have a unique voice in the wider story of settler, Indigenous, and diasporic people (King, 2019). For all of us, having these hard conversations and understanding our unique positionalities in relationship with land and with one another is crucial to discovering a more authentic lineage and system of balance to care for land and place, and the foundation for how we move into spaces, attending to principles of invitation and reciprocity (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2013).

In that same conversation among all three co-storyers, Ndindi and Trevor shared how they were invited into the spaces in which they now work and make community. As they shared their stories, I remembered to see their invitations through the lens of their positionalities.

Ndindi shared her story:

Ndindi: “Scott and I were at another school, and we were very much interested in students being able to pursue their own thing in a non-coercive way. That was huge for us. Like, all of the authoritarian type of school things were a real issue. And the other issue was the language of social justice that didn't seem to move beyond just conversations, towards really participating in movements, and actually knowing what goes on in our city in a real way. We didn't feel like that was going on. But we were employed there, and then after meeting with a handful of parents after doing several different projects, they pretty much invited us to start our own after-school thing. And the more we talked about it, every time we pulled away at like, what should the program look like? It'd be, well, we don't want homework. We want to make sure it's really based on some of these principles. And after pulling all of that away, it's like, well, we don't want to go to our nine to five anymore. Like why can't we do this all day? Is this possible? And that's really how it came about.” (26)

The conception of Angeles Workshop School appears rooted in this significant moment of Ndindi and Scott being asked by parents to extend their after-school program into an all-day school. In continued conversation with the parents who prompted them to take on this endeavor, Ndindi and her partner Scott eventually made the decision to leave the security of their salaried jobs and create a school that fit the *needs* of the requesting parents and families, and which fit the *place and community* to which it belonged. For Trevor, his story of invitation included several layers, people, and moments:

Trevor: “I feel like there are so many layers of it, you know, parents and then certain mentors in college, and mentors in my graduate program. Hālau Kū Mānaa, actually, I got the invite from a white lady that really had nothing to do with this and had very little connection to it. I happen to know one Filipino girl that lived there, worked in the office, and was like, ‘Yeah, I can get you in’. So, the person actually called me in, really doesn’t belong anywhere in the story, but I think it was easy to get in the door. But to be welcomed from the doorstep in—that was by the teachers that were already here. And the students who first rejected me and gave me a lot of shit, which is well deserved and a good way to check everybody at the door. I feel like they deserve a validation process, and I went through the validation process for a couple of years. I don’t know, it’s just layers. It just seems like there are still a lot of layers. A lot of doors that I’m outside of that I’m not asking to come in and maybe other doors that I’m invited to come in and I’m not ready.” (26)

As I listen to Trevor, I make note of his awareness of the doors he stands outside and of the doors that are open to him that he is not yet ready to enter. I wonder what it will take for him to feel ready. I appreciate his pace. I remember the importance of waiting and the totality of this

relationship with invitation. There is a need for deep listening, for commitment to see your acceptance of invitation through, for willingness to sacrifice comfort or even stability, and to find yourself in often uncomfortable places as you journey from outsider to community.

It is clear to me that invitation is necessary. Not only is the concept of invitation intrinsic to Indigenous ways of being, but it is also crucial to forming culturally responsive relationships as the foundation for any humanizing and equity-centered work. Entering spaces and doing work in the absence of invitation is invasive and colonizing (Berryman et al, 2013). It negates the possibility of relationship, trust, understanding, and authentic collaboration emerging, as the community will view an outsider who has entered without invitation as an invader (Berryman et al, 2013). In a dominant culture where agendas are often self-selected and appointed without obtaining invitation from the people and communities who belong to those spaces, prioritizing the practice of doing only what you have been invited to do and going only where you have been invited to go is a crucial step in decolonizing praxis.

“What did the community ask for?”

If receiving invitation has been the first prerequisite for us to make any entrance or do any work, deep listening has been one of the necessary tools for us to carry out our work once we have begun, or even before we start. Ndindi, Trevor, and I are connected to this study in our mutual wonderings about how to create schools for our communities. As we approach this question from various positionalities and places in our personal journeys, one thing we have found to be critical is that we only do what our communities have asked us for; if they have

asked nothing of us, we do not take on our own agendas. If they ask something specific of us, we work closely with them to carry out a collective vision.

The inception story of Angeles Workshop School is clearly rooted in a moment of parents asking Ndindi and Scott to create a school for their students. In Ndindi and Scott's stories of how they worked together with those parents to make Angeles Workshop School a reality, we see just how crucial listening to what the community asks for was in actuating their desires.

Ndindi: "We started Angeles workshop in 2014, at the tail end of that school year. The reason Scott and I started it was because a parent approached us. We were running an after-school club, which was called the STEAM club. Scott would be helping people do art, I would be helping kids with science. Then that club got bigger. It was also a small school, it was a school of a total of 50 kids. And that club got bigger than the average number of kids in classes. At one point nearly everyone in the school was in the club. It was a "come and explore your passions," and we're gonna work on projects together and then we're going to get experts to come and help us. You also get to propose what you want. People also wanted to talk about real issues. People didn't want to do fake projects. They wanted projects that do something in the world. So then parents approached us and said, 'Can you do this all day?'" (19)

Ndindi's story of *answering* what the parents of her community asked for is grounded in the understanding that communities may *not* want you to do anything or what they want may be very different from what you had in mind.

Ndindi: "We really need to listen to what the community is asking for. And what they're demanding of education so that you don't impose it on them. Which might end up being that the answer that you get is that you should not start your own school. And this has

happened, actually twice, to two of my friends. One who works with immigrants from El Salvador in particular, and in the end, the community was more like, 'No, we want the resources of the public school system. But can you do after-school programming? That's what we need. That's what we prefer. We actually would like to really understand U.S. society. We don't want to pull away and do our own thing.' So, I think you have to be very comfortable with people saying 'No' and 'That's not good'. That's not what they want."

(26)

Ndindi's awareness of what the community may *not* want has caused her to experience doubts about starting her school. She storied to me how she moved through those doubts to respond to what the community *did* want:

Ndindi: "I think we discussed my doubts. And if I had just led with the doubts, we would never have started the school. We do have all of those types of questions. But the reason we have something is because our community asked for it. And now, I kind of owe it to the generations before me to try. I owe it to the ones coming after me to give it a good enough, serious kind of try. And since we're occupying space in capitalism, the type of mode of production it is, no one can completely avoid it. And so how are we the least harmful type of people? I think it makes a difference to the framing... I think the hubris part is where people think, 'I have to be able to do all of it'. But it's like, I am invited to do one tiny little piece. I just have to try and do my bit of it in this connected thing that we're trying to do." (26)

I heard Ndindi's sense of responsibility to serve her community woven together with a genuine humility that allows her doubts and questions to serve as guides back to dialogue and communion with those she serves. Rather than remaining in inaction where she could not cause any harm or receive any criticism, she took up both her desire to serve and her concerns

that she may overstep her invitation and brought them to her community in dialogue, while reminding herself that she is one part of a connected whole.

As we move through our *necessary journeys*, this practice of listening to what the community asks for has held us in an ongoing process of dialogue, asking, and listening to the community. This process has required us to slow down and fosters humility as we realize our ideas are not always best or desired by the folks whom we hope to serve (Freire, 1970). Yet in this dialogue, an avenue of co-construction has been opened which has allowed radical, transformative community work to emerge (Freire, 1970).

Much Time

The practice of waiting for invitation is grounded in anti-colonial conceptions of time. Colonialism has crafted the human experience in relationship with labor, and it values productivity and efficiency at the expense of relationship and reciprocity (Darder, 2015). We experience the pressure to act on colonial timelines in work, in society, and in the academy. In contrast, many Indigenous cultures regard and experience time as non-linear, plural, multi-faceted, and inter-connected from many sets of relationships (Rifkin, 2017). As educators and community workers, resisting colonial impositions of time, and simply slowing down and waiting has been a decolonizing practice.

Connected to Trevor's story of coming to Hālau Kū Māna is his personal journey of asking if he should create his own school. This story spans many years and many contexts, and ultimately shows us how much time we must be willing to take to receive a clear and resounding

invitation into a space or action. Trevor spoke to Ndindi about how his grappling with questions around starting a school began 15 years ago and how he still feels he is in process of learning new roles before he can step into a community-founder position of a new school:

Trevor: “Joey knows that my master's thesis 15 years ago was on whether I should start a school and the answer was ‘No’. So, I fully agree that you have to be able to listen to others and also to yourself. I felt like I wasn't ready. And I think the best thing to do before you start your own school would be to teach in one and perhaps you can administrate in one before you start one. So, you kind of have a sense of how everything goes. Maybe first be a parent, a student, a teacher, and an administrator and kind of sit in all the roles. I'm sure that would help. I think I've decided I don't want to be a principal until I've really sat in all the different roles.” (26)

Our mutual asking the questions around beginning our own community school has connected me to Trevor from the start of our academic relationship. In a sense, my path in this dissertation parallels the steps he took for himself in his master's research work. He spoke to me about that story this past September as I joined him in his classroom:

Trevor: “My master's thesis was: ‘Let's start a charter school in North Kohala’. I have family land with grapes on it, and the state is neglecting it. And I want to move back to Kohala and take care of these grapes. There's a *lo'i* there that belonged to Kamehameha. And so, it's this historic *lo'i*, and that's what I want to do.” (1)

Though Trevor's desire to start a school was so beautifully and authentically tied to a sense of place, belonging, and responsibility, he ultimately decided at the end of his study that he was not yet qualified to begin that school. His decision has always impacted me as I have witnessed

too many folks move in the opposite way– rushed, confident, without much consideration.

Throughout my time of getting to know Trevor, I have been witness to the humility and gravity he carries with him in his work. He has an eagerness to do many things but is tempered with a patience to do things the right way for all those involved. Only now after spending 15 years in service at Hālau Kū Māna apprenticed to the great teachers and leaders there, is Trevor once again *slowly* considering his role and responsibility to create a school by opening his family land for the benefit of the community, in whatever ways they collectively see fit.

Like Trevor, Ndindi also delayed and extended her process in order to make sure adequate time was spent on reflecting, learning, and communicating for our work and actions to be as authentic as possible. For Ndindi, a sense of needing more time to learn and consider led her to Chapman to obtain her Ph.D., a step she felt was necessary to address the many questions she held as she entered her professional teaching life and continued her community and advocacy work in California. Both Trevor and Ndindi have resisted colonial pressures of ambition and power to choose the process of taking more time to learn, build relationships, and wait for invitation.

In one conversation, Ndindi and I exchanged thoughts about trying to understand our place as occupants on land that we are not native to, and the challenges in forming authentic relationships and allyship with the Native communities where we live. Ndindi narrated her experience in forming relationships with Tongva folks, a process that required much time:

Ndindi: “What does it really mean to live on Indigenous land? Where we have so little

interaction with these folks. I mean, I might know two dozen people who are Tongva. That's been purposeful, because I'm part of different things. And that's taken a long time to establish these relationships. We didn't just become friends easily. But I don't think a lot of people don't even know how to figure that out." (18)

Ndindi also shared with me that in her process of building relationships with the Los Angeles community and the extended small school community, many of these connections have been formed and reinforced slowly over the course of many years and repeated visits. Initial visits only bring a surface impression of each other, but to get to a point of deeper mutual understanding and agreement in true reciprocity, many repeated conversations and visits need to be exchanged.

It is evident to my co-storyers and I that much time is necessary. Yet we also recognize that time is often the element most immediately contested and challenged in dominant capitalist colonial society (Tuck & Yang, 2013). This process for me underscored my belief that decolonizing our conceptions of time, moving more slowly, and insisting that time is needed for the steps we must take on our journeys and in our work with communities, is critical to arriving at authentic relationships, authentic knowing, and authentic invitation. This is not to say that we should waste time or work inefficiently when the work has already been placed on our shoulders. But rather, we should be cognizant of the steps that require much time and spend the necessary time to prepare ourselves for each step and labor at a pace that allows for authentic collaboration within our communities.

In Reciprocity & For the Common Good

For Ndindi, Trevor, and I, at the heart of entering spaces and doing any work is a desire for reciprocity—a core principle of Indigenous, anti-colonial, and collective peoples' cultures³. We recognize that we should not enter spaces where we do not belong unless we believe we can benefit those communities in some way. As a European-descended woman, I have needed to hold this belief up to an anti-colonial lens. Coloniality has long perpetuated white saviorism as an excuse to invade and attempt to erase and subjugate Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities (Patel, 2016; Smith, 1999). Considering Trevor and Ndindi's cautionary words at the beginning of this chapter, I am reminded to ask myself, *"Who is inviting me? How are they letting me know that my entering their spaces may benefit them?"* These questions cannot be answered rhetorically within the outsider themselves. These questions necessitate conversation, the first step in relationship-making and communion.

Trevor spoke to me in several instances about the deep connection Hālau Kū Māna has to the place it inhabits and to the families who have lived there for thousands of years. As a school located in a physical place and taking up space, Hālau Kū Māna has served a reciprocal purpose to the land and people to whom the land originally belongs. The school community needs a place to operate a school. In return, they care for the land, stream, and families of that

³ *Collective peoples* and *collective cultures* are terms shared with me through personal communication by Dr. Charlotte Evensen to denote non-western, non-colonial cultures that value collective social structures and hold beliefs of interconnectedness and the common good as central to their cultures. These cultures may or may not be classified as Indigenous or Aboriginal but are non-colonial in nature.

place. Trevor spoke to his students about this *kuleana* in class one day. Because I did not have permission to record when students were present, I documented through notetaking what I saw, heard, and experienced in Kumu Trevor's classes.

9/22 Hālau Kū Māna-Trevor's Classroom

5 Students are here today, all at their own desks. The rest of the students are on a video call.

Trevor excitedly talks about King Kamehameha conquering all the islands and choosing to live in Makiki (where the school is). Because he can plant here in the cinder (in the most recent eruption)... He comes from a place that has volcanoes and he comes here and the only place that has black cinder on this island is here in Makiki where he plants sweet potatoes. Nowhere else...Iolani palace is in Makiki. His family stayed right here, right by our campus.

Trevor starts to talk about white people coming and Manifest Destiny. The boys are looking at the screen and at Kumu Trev, the girls look at their computer screens. No one here is taking notes.

"The white people brought cows here. The king's policy was you can have as much 'aina as you can use. White people brought cattle to use all the land that's not being used. The kanaka didn't go into the forest because they can't take care of it. So the white people went into the forest and destroyed the forests except the back side of the mountain where the cows couldn't go. That's how rich landowners got rich cuz they just claimed the land. Then the king made them buy the land they were using. The kanaka already realized our forests are dying by the time of the overthrow in late 1800s. White people knew too and didn't want the mountains to fall apart because no root system. But all not native trees. The fastest growing trees. Planted the weakest trees fall over in the wind.

On our hike tomorrow, we gonna see trees that fell over the trail guaranteed. Until we get to back side of the mountain and see native trees. Native trees don't fall over so easy. Honolulu is part of legacy of Kamehameha. Reason you see choke buildings here is not because of white people. It's because Kamehameha felt this was the best place to do business."

Trevor puts a slide of trash dump: "Makiki became a place of illegal drugs and dumping". As Trevor tells this story of the past generation dumping trash out the window or dumping couches into this valley, he has the attention of all his students. He says: "You might be thinking, 'Where is the pile of rubbish?' Our campus is on the pile of rubbish. So much trash that it actually pushed the stream 75 feet that way. We are all sitting on a landfill. The *lo'i*, the mango tree, everything is on rubbish. They covered it with trash before we got here but we can see the side of the stream is all filled with rubbish. Our first stream cleanup, we saw 7 washing machines. That's part of why they let us come here. The aunties and uncles didn't necessarily want us, rather have nature, but they thought we can't get rid of this problem unless something gets in the way of this problem, better to have a Hawaiian school here. That's part of our Kuleana to be here. Make sure no rubbish gets dumped here. We're here to get rid of the trash which is from this part of our history. But we are also here to replace invasive with natives. Replace invasive trees with native trees and invasive people with native people. Also, here to honor this guy (pic of Kamehameha) most of us descend from folks who were loyal to Kamehameha. We're here not just to get rid of rubbish but to honor our history and our future and to take care of the kanaka still in this village ... like Kumu ____ whose family has been here for 1000s of years. Her grandma always talk about when they left the caves and moved into stick houses. To remove the trash, support the families, and honor the kingdom and people been here even before the kingdom. That's our *kuleana* here."

I found it significant in this story that Trevor mentioned the aunties and uncles whose families have been there “even before the kingdom” did not necessarily want Hālau Kū Māna to be on that land, though they are a Hawaiian school. There is an insider/outsider tension at play even within the same socially constructed concept of nationality or culture. For the families here, community may have been defined even more narrowly as an insular unit tied to family genealogy or to a geographically contoured place– Makiki Valley. Yet the invitation and subsequent relationship between Hālau Kū Māna and Makiki Valley and its original inhabitants seemed to have been grown out of familiarity and cultural connection– an insider knowledge of the meaning of *kuleana*, knowing of the honor that must be given to those of the first generations of the place, and knowing the respect that must be paid when standing on a place to which you are invited (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2013).

The road to entering a community as an outsider is often long and, some would argue (i.e., Kaomea, 2001), unnecessary when the community is best cared for by those who know it best, those who were born into it. Yet, for many folks, community is not so easily defined. Colonization and globalization have detached many Indigenous peoples from their native lands (Quijano, 2000). People of diaspora are often left with no choice but to build community wherever they end up (Dei, 2008). Many folks of settler descent are coming into an awareness of their positionality and asking questions about how to begin undoing settler-colonial occupations while wondering what spaces of authentic community are available to them. In this socio-political context, cultivating communion and taking the time to understand what is

reciprocity and common good in specificity to a place is now more urgent in education than ever (Kovach, 2009).

Ndindi, Scott, and the Angeles Workshop School community have devoted themselves to having these conversations and finding their way to serve their urban, eclectic community in Palms, CA. Ndindi described to me her intimate relationship with the place in which her school is located.

Ndindi: “This was one of the first things we did before we got the [school] building. The little church where Scott and I got married is about two blocks away. And Father Shamo, the person who married us, was one of the first people we met in the community. And he was like, ‘Yeah, you can use our parish hall for P.E.’, which is what we do when there’s not a pandemic. We use their kitchen when I want to do like a project. They support our mutual aid where we have a community fridge there, and they helped us organize it and it’s taken care of by other people in the community, as well as us and our students on Thursdays. We wanted to foster real relationships and we wanted people to see our young people out there and know ‘We’re part of this thing’. So that was kind of how we thought about place, especially as people who are not like native Angelenos necessarily. This is particular to people who are not Indigenous to this land.” (20)

Through her fostering of relationships with the community and taking time to know who is here, and what the diverse community needs are, Ndindi and Scott have been able to cultivate an authentic and dynamic relationship with their Palms community and created a school that exists to serve that community on many levels.

I have come to understand that without seeking reciprocity, any work that we attempt to do is colonizing, an imposition of our actions and presence in places that we were not invited to

be in or in ways which we were not asked to do. Reciprocity is an agreement made dialogically to share or exchange for mutual benefit. As we attend to reciprocity, we must also be keenly aware of the settler-colonial structures we interact with, and which benefit some more than others. Learning how to establish reciprocity and seek the common good is a necessary principle of our journey as community educators and workers.

To Grapple Deeply Within & Other Necessary Processes

With a spirit of seeking invitation, the nuanced work of understanding our positionalities at its various intersections– and thus our insider and outsider status in various communities and spaces– can be done in respect and communion (see Chapter 7- School as Communion). I see this work as leading us into a process of grappling within, continuing to seek out our blind spots, listening for feedback, and looking for new lenses to see the contexts within which we live and work. This process must be both internal and interpersonal, as we reflect critically and deeply on our own experiences and understandings, and listen patiently for guidance, correction, and affirmation from the communities in which we participate.

Part of Trevor's story of coming into a place and waiting for invitation feels very familiar to me in how it is intertwined with questions of belonging and identity, especially given the context of our whiteness. Up until this summer, Trevor did not know he was of Hawaiian descent, and so his journey into the school, especially as a white-presenting male, was tied intricately to his whiteness. (In other regards, his maleness and many other identities also came into play, although arguably, the identity that is first interacted with by others is race.) Because

of the history of white colonialism on Indigenous and Black communities and other colonized communities of color, the need to counteract the historical acts of invasion and violence on those communities is especially pronounced. Therefore, for those of us who need to consider our white-colonial genealogies or white-passing privilege, grappling deeply within and listening deeply to our communities is an ongoing necessary process.

Trevor shared with me a story of being encouraged to consider an admin position at Hālau Kū Māna. He spoke intimately with his entire Hālau Kū Māna community and while many were in favor of him stepping into the vacated admin role, a few of the Kanaka staff were not in favor, wanting instead for a Kanaka person to fill this role. Trevor told me that if the feeling was not unanimous, he would never consider putting his name in the hat for the role. Though Trevor has in many ways over the years been accepted wholly into the Hālau Kū Māna community and in many ways into the Hawaiian community, a dialectical relationship with identity prevented him from taking on a leadership role. Internally, Trevor questioned his place as (at-that-time) a non-Hawaiian person. Externally, he looked to his community for their response and instruction. If they had appointed him to that role, Trevor, loving and caring so deeply for Hālau Kū Māna, would have put his gifts and energy to serve it in the way that the community asked. However, without “100%” consensus on this invitation, Trevor was not willing to step into a position of power that he knew belonged rightfully to a Kanaka Maoli. Even as Trevor processes the new information about his true Hawaiian lineage, he continues to grapple with his identity, as an admittedly white-presenting man, and one who was raised

disconnected from his Hawaiian roots. He said to me that who he is to himself and to others does not change overnight with one DNA test. I sense that he is walking a path of honoring his truth and his ancestors—his belonging and service to the place both he and his Hawaiian ancestors call home, while simultaneously figuring out which steps remain necessary for him as a descendant of white colonizing lineages in those same spaces. For Trevor, taking up less space and supporting Hawaiian voices from behind the scenes still seems to be the essence of his personhood and work, the result of his internal grappling.

Ndindi also shared with me some insight into her internal grappling. As a diasporic Indigenous woman, and as a black woman in the United States, her internal dialogue looked very different from mine and Trevor's as we feel the tensions of our white ancestry and white presentation always at play. For Ndindi, there is an assuredness of her positionality, in some ways simple and singular as an undoubtedly black woman, in other ways hidden, complex, and multiple as an Indigenous Kamba woman and as an immigrant to a place of historical and present-day violence against black people. Her existence here is radical: a woman, a black woman, a queer woman, an immigrant, a scholar, an educator, a founder. Yet as a person connected to a place that generations of her lineage can call home, she grapples with her absence from that place, questioning her time of return home, and if her service here in the United States is worth all the sacrifice and very real realities of struggles she faces in doing the work she does here. She also has an ongoing conversation with herself about leaving the public education system to start a small independent school and what context that places her in.

Over several conversations, Ndindi shared with me the following threads of story around internal questioning:

Ndindi: “There are all the contradictions that keep popping up, that I have to just really sit with and grapple with. We have a lot of contradictions. We’re just trying to love each other and offer what we have. And it’s made me more humble over time. When I explain these things to people, I like to always lay out the full contradictions, because sometimes, the initial reaction is, ‘Oh, wow, you have a school, there’s no homework and there’s the glossy aspect of it, it sounds very good’. But I also like to add the layer of the reality of how it is if you’re really serious about: ‘We don’t want elitism. What type of dollars are you willing to turn away? What type of families are you okay with not being here, who might have had resources and connections?’ Being okay with those hard choices, and then also realizing maybe that was a sacrifice. Maybe it shouldn’t have been made. Even with my own career. We don’t have a retirement plan. We rent. And stability does make a material difference. To my family, one time, you know, my parents will get older. Yeah, did I give up stability? For my own kind of selfish thing? And I’m concerned about it. I’m using the word community here and there. But there’s an aspect of this that gratifies me, and I don’t know if I took an easy way out. And I’m not comfortable with that, at all... I still have those kinds of questions. Because unless we get some kind of like, windfall of money, or something shifts in the way society works a little bit or, or we get a little bit more creative with what we’re doing, we’re not likely to accumulate wealth. I have no evidence that I won’t be in the same place 10 years from now. And then, at some point, I’m 40, Scott’s 48. So we’re not going to live forever. As I age, how’s this thing going to work? Those are some of the real questions. I try and learn from people who’ve done this kind of thing for a long time. And they seem to think it’s worth sticking it out with a project that as long as you’re kind of fulfilling your vision and mission, and you haven’t lost your way– it is worth it. And then there’s a lot of hope and relationships that should

sustain you, and that there should be more options. I just, I just worry. That's all.” (22)

In all of this questioning of her path and the contradictions that lie within, perhaps the greatest sacrifice that Ndindi lives with is not residing and working within her homeland.

Ndindi: “Before meeting Scott, my plan was really to return. To go back and not even live in Nairobi... I was like, ‘I really would like to reconnect and just kind of do my own little, Indigenous, I didn't think of it as a school, I thought of it more as, like a program’ So I was like, ‘Well, maybe if I get a job at the university, then I can be only two hours away. So then I can be coming back and do whatever people want to do.’ And then it ended up not going that way. But that's also something Scott and I talk about into the future. At some point, we'll get old, we can't do this anymore...” (18)

Whenever Ndindi talked about going back to her ancestral home in Kenya, in Kambaland, I often noticed her looking up and to the distance, remembering that place that must be so tangible to her. We have shared with one another through conversation over the years what it feels like to have this tug at our heartstrings to “go back home”. Both Ndindi and I are now committed to partners who are not from the places we are from and do not speak the languages of our families. We are both committed to a work in education that seems to have rooted us in responsibility to our invitations to these places in the United States, at least for now. And yet we grapple, as Ndindi has often put it, with “our contradictions”, and figure out how to be in community and find belonging, checking if our service in these ways is necessary, invited, and worth it.

To my adviser Lilia, I reflected aloud what I had learned while allowing myself to participate in this process *collectively*, a vulnerable, uncomfortable, yet ultimately, liberating

journey:

Joey: "I think it starts with the grappling because if you start anything without the grappling, you can't anchor yourself in a direction that's going to be of use, or that you've said, like, I'm here to do the least harm possible and you've recognized that if I step one foot over there, that's a realm of harm. This research was such a healing experience for me because I got to experience working with others through those questions and feel that trust that I can take a step in this direction and it's going to be a helpful direction. And so part of that belonging, too, was like me grappling with ideas of being a settler or being a diasporic person, not being Indigenous, and saying, if nowhere that I go, I am Indigenous to, then how can I be a better settler where I am? How can I feel like I belong here and as a mother, having children, how can I raise them to feel like they belong in some way, without erasing this history that we participate in a settler society? And so that that conversation about belongingness is because then I had a real question. I said, Do I have the right to ever feel like I belong, you know, and some of those questions were so personal with Trevor, like, 'Does my family have a right to go to Hawaii even though my husband grew up there?' We are not Indigenous Hawaiians. And what does belonging look like for us? Is it part of our story? And if it isn't, I have an immense burden on me as a mother. I brought human beings into this world and how do I move through life, knowing that they can't belong anywhere? And so, I got to work through those questions to a place where I was invited into spaces where I can belong, and feel like I belong and my children can feel like they belong. And it's because those questions were at the core of our relationship building." (27)

Had I not experienced this sharing of stories and collectively working out our questions and realizations around contradictions and concerns, I would never have known the trust that can be built through such an act of shared vulnerability. This journey requires vulnerability, in

careful, quiet ways. Though many steps of our grappling must be done over much time, internally, to truly be in communion and in community service, this grappling must enter a collective space as an anchor for our trustworthiness and direction-taking. I expressed this realization to Lilia:

Joey: “That is what is at the heart of my conversations throughout this whole time, and it's just a story of waiting for the answers and listening for the answers and in those answers, when you're patient enough and receptive enough, and you've gone through challenging the self, you know that the critical self-reflection, like there's there is so much beauty on the other side because it is a story of people coming together. It is a story of communion. It is a story of reciprocity. I think there was so much that was spoken between or among the three of us, like wow, I received such a gift from you and, and hearing from them like they received also such a gift from this process, just made all of this okay. Like it made me taking up their time okay. It made me going into their spaces okay.” (27)

At the core of my internal grappling which connects me to my own communities and to Trevor and Ndindi and their communities in this study and beyond, are the following questions: *Who am I? Where do I belong? How can I be a better settler (or how can I unsettle)? How can I be of service?* In many ways, I cannot answer the question of how to be a better settler (or if it is possible to unsettle) until I first answer in a solid way who I am and where I belong. If I don't understand how to be a better settler, in other words how to resist settler-colonial structures within my context and identity, then any attempts I make to be of service will be unchecked in their coloniality. These questions cannot be answered in isolation internally; they must be informed

by our relationships and dialogues with others, especially with those who preside over the most intimate knowledge of the places in which we seek to inhabit.

As I think about this exercise in reflexivity, I am reminded of how the traumas of colonization affect all of us differently. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, speaking to other Indigenous scholars, cautions: “As scholars, we are not immune to, or above, the historic trauma of our peoples and we have to work purposively to create healthy decolonized academic spaces” (p.6). For me as a non-Indigenous researcher, this grounds me further into intentionality, yet also reminds me to resist a romanticizing or pedestal- placing of Indigenous folks as inherently decolonized. I am reminded of the unfinishedness of our journey, as Freire writes of, and of our ongoing need to examine our contradictions collectively and dialectically, negotiating which ones we may live with for now as we refuse to live with others. To grapple with these questions and others, then, is a necessary part of this journey.

A Responsibility to Your Invitation

A practice of waiting for invitation is rooted in an acceptance of the possibility of refusal, and a humbling realization that we are not entitled to anything (Tuck & Yang, 2013). This realization leads us to hold no expectation of being granted access to space, knowledge, or resources that are not ours. Any invitation to partake in these things is a great gift. For Ndindi, Trevor, and I, receiving the gift of invitation has invoked both a desire to reciprocate and a sense of responsibility. I will expand on this idea of responsibility and service in Chapter 9; here, I just mention briefly that responsibility to our invitation calls us to move past our fears

and into service to our communities, as a necessary step on our journeys.

In both Ndindi and Trevor's stories, I witnessed a willingness in them to sacrifice personal comfort for the sake of their work within their communities. For both Ndindi and Trevor, this sacrifice holds anti-colonial implications as they each make choices to forgo capitalist conventions of wealth to continually carry out their *kuleana*, their role and responsibility, to their communities. Trevor has served the Hālau Kū Māna for 15 years and Ndindi is in her eighth year of sustaining Angeles Workshop School. These sacrifices are all-encompassing. In many ways, they do not leave their work at the door when they go home each night. The weight of the relationships and needs of the community permeates into all their choices. Trevor and Ndindi have spoken about the personal practices they have cultivated in order to create boundaries around self-care to sustain themselves. Yet they acknowledged that in doing work rooted and grounded so deeply in community, there is no anonymity or apathy, rather there is a deep responsibility that you must learn to live in harmony with.

In many ways, I have not yet received much responsibility as my journey is still young. The completion of this dissertation research, with Ndindi and Trevor as my guides, initiates me into a new portion of my path, one in which I move past the crippling weight of my internal questions and self-doubt and into a sustained dialogue with my mentors, guides, and community which *requires* me to respond to the lessons I have learned, the skills I have acquired, and the invitations I have received. Walking in this way is to acknowledge that we must do so imperfectly and that we are unfinished in our learning. I processed some of this realization with

Ndindi:

Joey: "I feel like there's so much that's unanswered, and there's so many ways in which I don't have a place, or I don't have a right. Much of my experience in education and in academia has been crippling. I think part of my process and spending time with both of you is this recognition of: me being crippled is also not contributing to anything helpful for anybody. I'm asking these questions, because if we're going to have school, which occupies space and land and belongs to people and people relate to one another, in relationship to the land, and to who was here first, and how did we move in here and what position of power do we occupy while I'm here in relationship to you ...like these are some of the things that we have to understand better, but also, some things we can only understand to a certain degree at a particular moment before we have to start saying like: 'Hey, I don't understand all this, but we also need to do something right now with what we know.'" (26)

Ndindi responded to me with her own narrative of her process:

Ndindi: "I'm thinking about these things as well, too. What's gonna happen in Palms when I think about land back? That to me is a serious demand. How do we participate in this in a real way? I think people will be able to claim actual patches and be able to use it how they need to, not even use but really get back to that relationship. But then the question is what about everyone else who is here? I hope we would all take on the leadership and the guidance and the mentorship of Indigenous folks, and then that it would become a little bit clearer. That's what I'm really interested in. Not to be the leader, or the person who creates what happens, but to ask, what's my role in the project to make this thing work beyond: 'We should stop destroying this place?'" (26)

Having responsibility for our invitation calls for us to move past our comfort and ego. We may be asked to step into roles that we do not choose for ourselves or ones that we do not feel

prepared to carry out, though Ndindi's and Trevor's testimonies speak of great joy and personal authenticity once they have assumed the fullness of those roles. However, to do such a work is not without sacrifice and not without a sense of urgency. When we understand that what we are being asked is because of who we are and what we have been given, we recognize that to withhold the precious knowledge, experiences, and skills, that have been imparted to us by our guides, mentors, and those who have gone before, and to not step into the roles that our communities are asking for, is to disregard principles of reciprocity and ignore how we contribute to the common good of our collective existences. Thus, carrying out the responsibilities we have been invited, even appointed, to do, is not only necessary, but in many ways, the impetus for many of us to walk this journey.

To the Mountain with Purpose

During my third week of month-long research time with Trevor at Hālau Kū Māna, Trevor announced to his *haumana* (students) that the next day we would be climbing the mountain Pu u Ōhi a as a class. Hālau Kū Māna is nestled in the valley at the base of the mountain, a trailhead up the mountain abutting the school's entrance. After the announcement, Trevor checked in with me to make sure I could go. I excitedly assured him I could. He then casually presented the problem of how the *kumu* (teachers) would get down the mountain at the end of the day. He would have all the parents pick up their children from the trailhead parking lot at the peak, but that unless we abandoned a *kumu* car at the peak before the start of school and the start of our hike, we would have a long walk down and not make it

back until well after dark. I quickly responded that I would ask Michael if he could join us in the afternoon. It almost felt as though Trevor was waiting for this offer, though he received it graciously. When Michael agreed, Trevor gave us many thanks acknowledging both Michael's sacrifice of time to come and my mother-in-law's sacrifice to watch our children while he did so. I would come to see that to even have this journey up the mountain happen, many had to come together, to offer, to each play their part.

The previous day, Kumu Trevor had turned on his projector to go over the native plants we would see on our hike. He spoke about the invasive species that have overtaken the island yet now have become ubiquitous in foreigners' minds with what a tropical paradise "like Hawaii" should be. Speaking to the *haumana*, he told them that we actually don't really know the Hawaii of our ancestors because the native plants have been diminished as the invasives have taken over. He said, "You can't go on an easy hike in Hawaii and see native plants. Isn't that sad? The only native plants we will see is the ones that Hālau Kū Māna planted up by the *lo'i*." But on this hike, we will all get a chance to see the native species and how they continue to exist. Trevor instructed, "I'm gonna pick 10 plants tomorrow and I'll tell which ones I'm gonna pick: *Kukui*, *Hame*, *olapa* (the word for hula dancer, the leaves dance/rattle in the wind, you can't help but notice them) the beak of the *I'iwi* bird is curved so the flower is curved—example of coevolution, the plant and the bird evolve together, they only work with each other, now nobody else can work together. *Uluhe* is a bandaoid crawls along floor of the forest, if there's a landslide, first thing to move in and stop the landslide, it crowds our invasive plants yet lets native plants pop

up through it. This plant only likes to crawl up native trees."

This would be my only day fully out of the classroom, with no set interview time, so I took off my researcher hat and approached it with pure joy and anticipation for the experience, as though I was also one of the children embarking on this journey for the first time. I was eager to learn about the plants, the mountain, and to experience what it felt like to walk from the valley to the peak.

After the students, about twenty or so, had been dropped off that morning, we gathered in the grassy space in the center of Kumu Trevor's classroom building, the lunch tables, the garden, and the tree-lined bank that slopes down to the stream. We circled to *oli*. This morning was full of feeling. There was excitement for our journey, joy to be reunited as a class in person after weeks of quarantine, apprehension a sense of duty to distance and keep one another safe, nervousness for the physical task ahead (many of the students were voicing their concerns about "making it all the way" or not). But under all the flurry of those feelings, we were also in the presence of something much heavier. The news of the passing of a beloved Hālau Kū Māna teacher, Trevor's dear friend, and a "princess" of her *lahui*, as Trevor had described her to me, had already traveled through the community. This morning, the *oli* was sung in honor of her. Trevor brought his laptop out and set it on the tables so his class could hear the whole-school morning protocol. Usually during morning *oli*, Trevor's voice is the loudest, his presence in the room the biggest and full of exuberance. This morning, he positioned himself in between the laptop and the rest of the class, his back to us. When *oli* began, his voice carried little sound.

Voice cracking with feeling, my friend Trevor hung his head and walked quietly away to weep.

That morning, Makana, Trevor's student-teacher intern, and one of the student's voices carried the *oli*, but they too were crying. After morning protocol ends and the rest of the school signs off, we are left in a silent circle. Makana embraces the students around her in shared grief. The rest of us stand in silence. The feeling is thick amongst us. We wait for Trevor to return. He has taken care to come back ready to start this journey. His exuberance has returned, and it feels genuine. I take note of how able he is to exist in both feelings, grief and joy, in balance. One not occupying more space than the other. Holding both, he moves forward with purpose. He is leading his students up the mountain today and there are great lessons to be learned along the way.

At that moment as we embarked on our hike, we were happy with anticipation. We took care to walk in single file and in social distance, but Trevor invited me to walk with him so we can continue our conversations for the research. I turned my phone recorder on and placed it in my pocket, not worrying about the sound quality, only doing so out of some sense of responsibility to Trevor's invitation. Today, I was here to experience. I would let memory and body record the rest. Later, I would be surprised at the depth of conversation that would emerge on the hike that day, and I'm grateful to Trevor's invitation and for his sharing.

Before we could enter the forest, we stopped to form two single-file lines, *kane* and *wahine*. A student, a *wahine*, began the *oli* that day. *Oli* outside, *oli* to the forest resonates differently than in the classroom. The same amount of singing in a bigger place, you would

think gets lost and quiet, but although it was quiet, it felt as though it was magnified back by the trees in a way that defies physics. I was struck by the unassuming beauty of the sounds I heard in unison from these *haumana*'s voices. This time I didn't hear one voice over the others, as I often did before in the classroom. This time, their voices and the forest for a moment became blurred into one entity. When the wind rustled through the leaves, permission granted to enter, we walked quietly ahead.

Something about talking while moving, while going *somewhere* over a long period of time, opens the heart and mind to conversations you don't normally have access to. On this road, Trevor and I shared our dreams and thoughts about education, community, and family with one another and finally we recognized that much of what we had been talking about and dreaming about all this time was the same thing. Trevor revealed that next year when his family moves back to the Big Island (where Trevor grew up) to a large plot of land near his brother's family, he hopes to begin a community school there with the folks he is connected to. He dreams of something even more experimental than Hālau Kū Māna— which has become increasingly mired down by bureaucratic red tape. Something truly grown from the land and people that comprise it, collectively restructuring resources and time to exist beyond colonial limitations. He dreams of existing “on the tip of the spear,” if even just to serve as an example of what's possible, enough to move the needle down the spectrum, to inspire others to continue asking *what more can we do?* His dream of a community school seemed to parallel the ones that Michael and I have shared in intimate conversation with one another, the dream that brought

me to this study in the first place. Funny how that happens.

When Trevor and I weren't talking, I walked with some students. Since there were only three adults on the hike, Trevor, Makana, and I spread out among the twenty-ish students on the hike. A few students set a very slow pace up the mountain and Makana hung back with them. Aside from pausing a couple of times for those students to catch up, nothing really slowed Trevor from his brisk pace, his years of hiking and track team evident. That left me in the middle of the pack with a group of students who were starting to lose momentum. In a shared activity, bonding is easy, and I started to sense my stranger-ness slip away as the students found their way to me and I to them in conversation. I encouraged them to keep going and offered to carry their packs. I wondered how Trevor would have managed this scattered group had Makana (who only had been able to come last minute when her college course was canceled that morning) and I had not been there.

Time moved differently as we moved ourselves up the mountain and though our pace was declining, we arrived before we knew it at the place right before the peak where we would break for lunch. Outside, on the mountain, children are allowed to be exactly children, and not long into lunchtime, friendly stick fights broke out and to us, nothing seemed more appropriate. Invitation was given for those who were not too tired to join Kumu Trevor on a short walk to the peak. For those of us who joined, we were gifted with a view of the whole mountain range: how it spreads to the south to the sea, to the east to a higher ridge, to the west to more valley, and to the north the mountain ridge continues. There were areas of the view

obstructed by bamboo, a grass species that grows fast and tall, taking over everything else. After taking in the view from every direction, we rejoined the rest of the group and grabbed our backpacks to head on the trail once again. This time we headed for the Native Forest, an area on the backside of the mountain that had been cleared of invasive species and replanted with only Indigenous plants.

To get through the native forest we had to walk through a thicket of bamboo, reaching far over our heads, at least twice our height. I have always been drawn to bamboo forests– they remind me of home in Taiwan. I have always felt serenity among them and loved to listen to their hollow taps against each other as they sway in the wind. I have always been so grateful to bamboo for its strength and usefulness and hardiness to grow in even the rockiest mountain conditions. Bamboo as an element of my place is sacred, useful, reciprocal, and in harmony.

Yet on this day, for the first time ever, after Trevor’s teaching, I felt differently about bamboo. She was invasive here. Her ability to grow fast and strong was not celebrated here, because she had grown through all the space where Indigenous plants once belonged. Here, she was not the chosen material for building and crafting as she was back in my homeland, in Taiwan. Kanaka 'Ōiwi ancestors had chosen their sacred woods long ago for the characteristics most important to them. Here on Pu u Ōhi a mountain, my beloved bamboo was a grass weed, taking up far too much space than she deserved. I was reminded of the importance of place and belonging, beauty in context, usefulness determined by the community who claims you. As I passed through the bamboo thicket, I thanked her for what she meant to me, and for the new

reminder she gave me today to never take more space than I was invited to.

As we walked, the bamboo finally cleared and gave way to light and sightlines that extended down the mountain. There was a gate in a fence that ran horizontal to the path, to keep wild pigs out, Kumu Trevor explained. He invited us to walk in and to take notice of what we saw and felt. He pointed out how everything grew in lush layers here—everything thriving at its own height, not crowding or pushing anything else. Symbiosis and balance. I can't really explain what I felt. I am not Hawaiian, and I have never been to Hawai'i as it existed in pre-invasion times. Yet there was a permeating sense of timelessness here. As though this is the way things were meant to be. I know I was told that, but I can't tell you why I *felt* it. The native forest did not look how I thought it would, because my presumptions were filled with visions of invasive jungle plants, monkeypod trees, pothos vines, and monsteras. The native jungle, in contrast, was delicate, lacy like the leaves of a fern. The native hibiscus was smaller and daintier. Everything felt feminine and gentle, at peace. I thought, "This is what a forest feels like where there is no violence or constant struggle to survive. No vines are choking down trees. No leaves crowding out the sun from the ground cover below, the smaller plants whose job it is to grow roots so deep and roomy that it holds the whole mountain side from washing into the sea. These plants all know each other and respect each other's roles. They are in deep agreement with each other, as my friend Ndindi would say. They have arranged perfectly how to each contribute and how to allow each other to thrive. This is a forest on a mountain facing the sea that knows generations of peace. Before the aggression came with the cows who ate up the

whole forest. If only everyone had a chance to feel this, I can't imagine anyone would think what we have now is better."

Trevor asked us all to wait for him at the gate of the Native Forest. He did not tell us why, but he needed the time to be alone. As we waited, some of the students grew restless and asked me if they should check on him. I felt a strange sense of responsibility to respond. I assured the students that he probably was ok and we needed to just be patient. Internally, I had a sense he needed time in the forest on this day as he processed his friend Cami's transition. I helped the students pass time by taking pictures and making small talk. After not a short while, Trevor reemerged, a tote bag filled with gifts from the forest, flowers, and ferns. He quietly approached one of the students who had asked if she and her family could make *lei* for Auntie Cami and her family. They had a quiet exchange and then we made our way down the path again.

At the end of the hike, we gathered once more at a fork in the road. This time, before Kumu Trevor would give the option for some of us to descend into the crater on the side of the mountain. He turned to his *haumana* as they circled around him, and he closed out the day with a weighty teaching:

"So why did we walk from school?... Why? Because that's what our *kupuna* used to do.

They used to walk everywhere. And one thing you should know about the forest if you haven't already figured it out, is that you don't just go in the forest for any kine reason.

That's not what the forest is for. Nowadays, people go in the forest for any kind of reason. Yeah, they blast music. They bring their Selfie Stick. People make any kine in the

forest.... But in the past, you had to have a reason to go in the forest. First of all, it was far. Right? You guys got to experience that it's kind of far. Hālau Kū Māna represents as high up as *kanaka* will put their houses, right? They wouldn't have houses up here, maybe like a shelter in case it rains. But you wouldn't live up here because you too far from everybody. But when you're codependent on somebody else catching your fish, so they can trade them with *kalo*, you're not going to live this far from everybody and have to walk down every day. So Hālau Kū Māna is kind of you know where the *kulauka* lands or as far up as people would live. And if they needed something from here, they thought about it before they just went because they couldn't have just jumped in a car.

How you treat the forest is going to be up to you as a person and as a generation. Are you going to access the forest for make any kine? Or are you going to keep the forest as a *wao akua*, a *wao* that is reserved for the gods that you're only going to visit when we absolutely need something? I'm not gonna lie. I've been up here just for take somebody on a hike. But it definitely has a different feeling when you have a *kuleana* to the forest. A wise kupuna once told me there was only three reasons that you were accessed the forest. Number one, you need something for a *wa'a*. Like a big tree to make the *wa'a*. Number two, you need something for *hula*. Number three, something for *hanakao'o*. If you don't need anything, what are you doing in the forest?"

"I'm not telling you that's the rule that you should follow... I just want you to have a perspective of the people that came before you. They didn't just come up here for any reason. They came up here because they had *kuleana* because it takes a lot of work to walk up this mountain. But anyway, I feel like somebody asked me like, when you go to heaven, or wherever you go, how will your ancestors recognize you? Will they recognize

you by this because you have the same face as them? Or will they recognize you by you doing the same things as they did? For me, I love to walk everywhere. Because I know that no matter what ethnicity you are, your *kupuna* used to walk everywhere, right?

How do I know that? you guys take cars, right, all of our *kupuna* used to walk everywhere. If we want to know them better, walk more places. Isn't it cool we can walk from our campus to the top of the mountain?"

"It's not that we need to do everything that our *kupuna* did. But it'd be good if we had a better understanding of the things that they did. And then apply them to now. And so I'm not saying that you should walk everywhere and sell your car and abandon the idea. Of course, I'm just saying. Consider what your *kupuna* did. Were they healthier or less healthy than us? I guarantee walking everywhere was a good thing. Anyway, that's all I wanted to say today. And I want to *mahalo* the two *makua* for coming along. One of them caught on to asking me, if we weren't here, would you have come? And I said no. I wouldn't have taken all you guys by myself. Oh, so *mahalo* to you guys for making a trip happen. And *mahalo* to everybody for pushing through. You guys made it." (9)

As he taught, we were all silent. I don't know how the students received these words, but I felt there was a thickness of listening in the air. There was a weight and quietness that lingered as half of us broke away and headed down the small bamboo-lined path into the crater. As we descended, so did the rain. By the time we reached the muddy bottom, a place where only slivers of sun reached in through tall conifer trees planted by one of Trevor's European ancestors, we were drenched and sloshing around in mud. We looked out into the circular opening at the center of the crater, impassable with a tangle of vines and bushes. The students

who had come down were joyously running around in the rain, some swinging on a rope swing that had been hung from the branch of one of the large trees. This place felt otherworldly.

I thought about how much further we would have to walk if we were to walk down the mountain, this time roads washed in fresh rain and us sopping wet. I thought about Trevor's words about coming to the mountain with purpose. I thought about what it meant to be native and know your place among the others who also belong there. I thought about knowing what your one small role is that fits perfectly into the bigger picture. I thought about knowing what you know, what is meant for you, and having peace with that portion, never feeling the need to go and take what is not yours. Not space. Not things. Not knowledge. I thought about Cami, and how she was transitioning on her journey at this time while I was here, in spaces sacred to her, beginning to learn about my own journey. Her transition to spirit forged more weight and urgency for all of us who are still walking to find our paths—the ones by which our ancestors may one day recognize us.

We headed down to the parking lot that sits next to the paved road, not far from the trail to the peak, where family members were waiting in cars to drive us home. Everyone was grateful we would not have to walk all the way down, rain still trickling, our legs now sore, feet caked in mud, the sun beginning to lower in the sky. But I was even more grateful for the transformation the mountain and Kumu Trevor and his *haumana* had gifted me on this journey today. A deeper, illustrated, unforgettable understanding of place, belonging, community, and the path we must walk to find it.

Summary

Humans speak often about community (Dei, 2008; hooks, 2003; Love, 2019). To be in community involves many different layers, identities, roles, and understandings. As we peel back the layers and consider what learning is necessary to be in community in more authentic ways, we begin to see a path for each of us. I came to understand that this journey is not prescribed or linear. However, through the sharing of stories and experiences, we can begin to identify some similarities in our journeys that allow us to deepen our connection to one another and our understanding of ourselves and each other. These processes take much time and visits to vulnerable places. As we go deeper into understanding the core of our identities and experiences, we touch on intersections of our existence. We must necessarily grapple with difficult questions and uncomfortable truths. Colonial imperialism has affected us all in different ways and as we move towards more authentic ways of being in community on every different level, we have to be ready to listen and learn how to resist settler-colonial structures and replace them with places of authentic harmony. This will lead us to conversations about rights and power, many of the answers to which are grounded in place, Indigeneity, and Indigenous teachings. With this understanding, we search for the parameters of belonging and responsibility. This awareness teaches us to wait for invitation, to walk in humility and patience, rejecting colonial entitlement, to not take space that is not ours and to allow the community to tell us what is useful. We walk in responsibility to our invitation and seek to be reciprocal and to contribute to the common good—as determined collectively by the members of

each place. As Freire writes of the unfinished work of becoming, we also see this journey with no clear end in sight, but rather as a recursive process in dedication to our communities, going to the places they send us, places we care for and maintain deep relationship with, to gather only what we need and only what is meant for us.

Understanding this *necessary journey* was not only an outcome of processing the data of this study; it is also a lens from which I examine the rest of the findings. The degree to which I am able to understand the stories told to me and learn the lessons presented to me is dependent on my position on this journey. As I continue to develop my relationships with those who have gone before me and have learned much from their own communities and experiences on their journeys, my understanding deepens. I continue to grapple with my own questions and intersections and strive for more authentic community in my life (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2003); in doing so my understandings are further grounded in contexts that speak back to these findings in a new way. This process is iterative and unfinished (Freire, 1970). As we move through the findings and discussions of this study, and as we revisit the guiding research questions which led me on this path, I hope we are able to expand a dialogue around possibility and practice, not as concrete conclusions, but rather as contributions to the collective conversations and consciousness which sharpen our lenses of seeing and guide our hands in service to our communities.

Chapter 7–School as Communion

At the heart of my research questions is wondering about the purpose of education; how can we better create and sustain *places* of learning and teaching which allow us to be more authentically human and help us to be in better relationships with one another and with our natural ecosystems (Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2019)? Trevor and Ndindi each invited me into their schools—places that are born out of a similar questioning within their own communities. Their unique learning places present a version of school that is in powerful contrast to the dominant institution with its problematic versions of schools under the settler-state. In listening to the data gathered, I began to understand that Ndindi and Trevor’s schools illustrate the possibility of *school as communion*—places in which learning and teaching is relational and dialogical, places that exist communally, places that are contextual and personal to those who comprise it, and places which are humanizing, stabilizing, and sustainable.

Oxford English Dictionary (2022) defines *communion* as: “the sharing or exchanging of intimate thoughts and feelings, especially when the exchange is on a mental or spiritual level”. Here we see that *communion* is relational, it is a sharing or exchange. It requires much time and understanding, as we often do not share what is intimate without trust and deep knowing. It exists in the realm of the mental, emotional, and spiritual, as it is the exchange of intimate *thoughts* and *feelings*. To facilitate sharing of our emotional and spiritual selves with one another is a humanizing practice—one that allows us to be more than just our bodies’ capacity for labor (Darder, 2015). It is a creative, transcendent, and communal experience. Darder (2016), drawing

from the writings of Freire, touches on this idea of *communion* as a revolutionary, humanizing endeavor in education and community self-determination and speaks of an “evolution of class consciousness with an explicit aim toward the establishment of a more harmonious and peaceful world” (p.3). Darder claims, “In this evolution of class consciousness, the communal spiritual dimension cannot be negated or ignored, given its constitutive potential to initiate and sustain committed revolutionary action” (p.3). Here we understand that it is within community and communal spaces that we develop class consciousness.

Defining *communion* in this way—as the complex experience of spirituality and consciousness, relationship and exchange, the communal and the revolutionary that we can cultivate in communal spaces as we function in community— in this chapter I bring together my findings drawn from Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School and the stories of the people who create and experience them. I present a portrait of the *possibility of school existing as a form of communion*. I will refer to the schools I have learned from in this study as examples of *communal schools*, drawing from our general understanding of *communal* as pertaining to *being of the community* and connoting an entity of *communion* as I have defined above. My hope is for my reader to bring their experiences and imaginations to the conversation, as we collectively replace oppressive versions of *school* with a reimagining of what authentic school is and can be in the dimensions of our most humanizing collective consciousness. Thus, presenting and discussing these findings is an attempt to increase collective refusal, (Grande, 2015) of the colonial-oppressive versions of school that do not serve us and to strengthen the collective

knowledge of the possibility of actualizing the versions of school our communities need and deserve.

Relational & Dialogical

If we understand *communion* as a necessarily relational verb, then we must speak of the ways in which *school as communion* exists as many different forms of relationships. From the data, I have chosen to focus on the following three forms of relationships which exist within communal schools: relationships with land/place, relationships with self and others, and relationships with knowledge. Each of these relationships implicates a dialogical and reciprocal nature (Chilisa, 2020; Kovach, 2009). Understanding the relational and dialogical nature of communal schools will help us to see how these schools set themselves apart from dominant school structures by focusing on the relationships that bring us further into our humanity and further into connection with place and people.

Relationship with Land/Place

There has been, especially recently, talk in education about the notion of schooling becoming detached from physical place. With the COVID-19 pandemic shifting much of education to online learning for a time, and with the growing trend in alternative education towards homeschool co-ops or meet-up schooling groups, the idea of school tied to *place* has been shaken. However, in my experience with Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School, school as a space of community is intricately tied to the land and place in which it is situated. Additionally, in Indigenous worldviews, land is a member of the community through a kinship

relationship, and the first teacher (Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2019). Thus, it is necessary to not only regard the land on which the community exists, but also to care for the relationship between the human community and the land. School, then, becomes a physically located place for the community to explore these relations and develop their awareness, skills, and capacity to sustain these relations in harmony (Greenwood, 2008). Furthermore, while dialogue and exchanges of knowledge among people can be now held in many ways (including through technology over a distance), gathering and coming together in a common place allows these relationships to be developed through shared rituals, physical activities, and routines of proximity. These help us to internalize and integrate collaborative, cultural memory-making (Johnson, 2010). This process is integral to decolonization because refusal of colonial routines creates a gap that must be filled and replaced; that is, as we dismantle the dominant system that is so ubiquitous in our lives, we must be prepared to create alternative structures and organized ways of being as replacements or else we are prone to returning to what is familiar to us, often the colonial structures we have existed under for generations. Thus, collaborative cultural memory making, especially when situated in land and place, allows us to exist more authentically beyond colonial limits and impositions to experience culturally constructed ways of being, learning, and working together (Romero, 2018).

Hālau Kū Māna serves a specific role as a place of education for Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian children who care to be connected to the Hawaiian community through learning Hawaiian language and knowledge. Furthermore, situated geographically in Makiki Valley, the

school functions in a particular relationship with its natural habitat. In the last chapter, I shared how the school has a *kuleana* to the original inhabitants of the valley, both human and more-than-human, functioning to preserve and restore the ecosystems of stream, *lo'i*, and valley. *Relationship to land* is embedded in the curriculum and practices throughout the school. Even with students doing distance learning, the campus is still alive every day with regular inhabitants, both human and “more-than-human”, a home to chickens, pigs, fish in the stream, birds in the trees, and countless other species of flora and fauna. Each day as I made my way to Trevor’s classroom, I would pass and greet the two elder aunties of the school who would already be busy with their tending of the gardens, pulling of weeds, or doing other routine tasks to steward the space. More than an activity to check off in a lesson plan, relationship to land is a foundational way of life in this school space, testifying of the authenticity of Hawaiian education that lives and breathes here.

As an element of pedagogy for most teachers at Hālau Kū Māna, students and teachers explore their relationship to land in deep, existential ways within Trevor’s classroom. Trevor spoke to me about his curriculum and the questions at the heart of it:

Trevor: “My time here has primarily been focused on developing my eighth-grade curriculum. And the question that I started with and never changed was, “How do we strengthen our relationship to 'aina?” And so, what did I get from Hālau Kū Māna, answers to that question. “How do we know relationship to 'aina?” (17)

Trevor then connected relationship with land to relationship with story– a sense of identity, culture, and lineage that is born out of both people and place:

Trevor: “In terms of understanding what 'āina is and the necessity that we need to eat from it to understand it, is in the same way that we won't understand Hawaiian culture unless we speak the language. We also won't understand Hawaiian culture if we don't eat from the land. And so, 'ōlelo is not a strong point of mine, but 'aina it's something I'm accustomed to and so it's just been every year going deeper into 'āina, and place names, and people and stories and connections. The quarter one question is, “Where do I stand in the mo'olelo?” And Hālau Kū Māna has answered that question for me. It's just, I'm trying to help 8th graders understand who they are, in the context of their family. And the people who came before them, and the people who sit around them, and the people that will come after them, as well as the, the original names for places. Call things by their right names. Rethink our geography. Rethink of the ocean as being something that connects us instead of dividing us. Just decolonize our idea of history and decolonize our idea of the future.” (17)

Trevor shared two guiding questions that he uses in his class: “How do I strengthen my relationship to 'aina?” and “Where do I stand in the mo'olelo?” *Mo'olelo*, a word in Hawaiian for *story*, here is tied to identity. But the question uses the word *stand*, framing the question of understanding one's identity as a process that is spatially situated. If school is a place to make sense of who we are and where we come from, then these two guiding questions, as a window into Trevor's pedagogy, allow us to see how intricately connected the conceptions of self, family, story, history, land, and space are within the Hawaiian language and culture.

While many schools and educators understand the importance of relational learning in education, understanding of relationships has usually been limited to human relationships, often in narrowly constructed ways. Relationship to land and place is largely missing in

dominant educational discourse, yet schools of Indigenous communities or born from relationships with Indigenous knowledges have always centered land and place as the source of knowing and being. As we attend to meeting the needs of our communities and acknowledge the growing urgency of climate crisis in a larger context, a reconciliation of our relationship with land and place and the subsequent communal education that can emerge from such a reconciliation, is necessary now more than ever (Greenwood, 2008; Johnson, 2010).

Indigeneity

To center our relationships to land and place as we construct our communal schools, we must necessarily attend to the genealogy of relationship to each place, a path that always traces back to the original peoples in every place of the world (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2013). Trevor shared with Ndindi and I about the Native Hawaiian conceptions of identity and revealed again how it is intrinsically connected to land:

Trevor: “Our word for land is ‘aina, which is where we eat from. That makes me believe that our relationship to land is primarily based on the fact that we're eating from it. And I think that's the most basic way you know your land—it's going to determine where your food and water come from.” (26)

In hearing this illustration of the relationship with land as a coexistence that cultivates the giving of food, I wondered aloud if this was a possible entry point for non-native people to come into a relationship with native folks and their ‘aina around the shared role of caring for the cultivation and protection of food and water.

Joey: “When you describe it that way, then is there like an opening for invitation that

people who are not like born to a specific land can make a relationship with land as long as they learn how to relate to 'aina as their source of food and water and respect it as such?" (26)

Trevor: "I feel like if everybody was eating from this land, we'd probably get along a whole lot better. You know, part of the disparity is, I care about my aquifer because I'm trying to grow kalo and you don't care about my aquifer because you're drinking bottled water from the store. But there's also a kulana, there's a hierarchy. There's a ranking of like, you could eat here for four generations. But then, there's people who have been eating here for more generations, and you need to recognize where you are in that genealogy. At this point we're up against so much, that a person that can just recognize their place in the line and be a person that is trying to eat from the 'aina is probably going to be considered a friend." (26)

Trevor's response to my question is grounded in principles of Indigeneity, an important reminder to never forget to ask ourselves where do we stand in the *mo'olelo*, looking to who was here before me, who am I supposed to be learning from and following, and who do I need to ask for invitation. Yet as we continue this dialogic work within ourselves and with one another, shifting our lives to a better relationship with land, with 'aina, that from which we eat, will, as Trevor said, bring all people, regardless of origin or identity, into better relationship with one another.

Pedagogy of Land & Place

Both Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School have created a pedagogy of land and place that is core to the rest of their teaching and learning, contextual to the places in which

they are situated, and reflective of the Indigenous, cultural, and anti-colonial knowledges possessed by the founders and visionaries of each school. In both Trevor's and Ndindi's teaching, along with that of their colleagues, I witnessed a curriculum that centers Indigeneity, Indigenous knowledge, and dialogical exploration of identity and relationality as it pertains to the ongoing effects of colonialism. Both schools include, as part of their regular curriculum, dedicated instruction time which takes place out of the classroom, specifically learning and building relationships with the surrounding land, places, and people of those places.

Angeles Workshop School is an urban school in a complexly multicultural community.

Ndindi briefly described some of these diversities to me:

Ndindi: "Palms is a neighborhood within Los Angeles. And you could tell the politics tend to be different here [than to Culver City]. It's very much more LA. I think Palms is like one out of 10 most diverse cities in America. Which is kind of cool that we landed here. We have relationships with the Hari Krishna community because they also have been here for 40-50 years. There's a huge Buddhist community as well. And then if you see the supermarkets that will tell you like, what communities are here: Sri Lanka and Malaysia, India from different regions." (20)

Diversity is also reflected in the student population within the school; students of many racial and ethnic backgrounds attend the school⁴. Ndindi often has spoken clearly to me about her

⁴ (See Portrait II) I make an intentional choice to not state statistical or demographic information about the students at Angeles Workshop School, other than to include Ndindi's storying of her students' identities and my own observation of their *diverseness*, which I admit is a vague word. Yet, I take Ndindi's lead in storying the identities of her students as (1) made up of many different races and cultures, including multi-racial backgrounds and (2) as being representative of the ethnic diversity of the community in which the school is situated. Additionally, I resist the colonizing trends of labeling humans under categories to treat them and value them differently. While race is important, and in the case of Black and Brown folks, often undeniable, trying to

desire for the school to be one that serves students of color, as a representative cross-section of their community.

Angeles Workshop School exemplifies what place-based pedagogy has come to be at their school through the process of experimentation, relationship-building, and thinking about place and ecology in a layered way. Ndindi explained this pedagogy to me:

Ndindi: “The question of space and place is very important to us when we started a school because we were part of a progressive school that had claimed this ethos, and actually, one of their huge social justice pieces was ecological justice. But that usually would come down to: we go to the beach once a year, or we take a curriculum from a group of climate scientists. And we both didn't feel satisfied, not because the environmental science classes in themselves were not robust, but it just was not connecting to the actual place where our bodies were, like the actual dirt that we were standing on. Thinking about colonization we kind of thought, ‘Well, how do you experience where you live as someone who's not native to that land, but wants to participate authentically?’” (28)

Ndindi and her partner Scott, along with the rest of the Angeles Workshop School, have been able to create a version of urban schooling which goes beyond delocalized or generalized eco-pedagogy and place-based curriculum that has been common at other alternative schools and is now making its way into more mainstream schools. Ndindi reveals that a limitation she experienced with the more mainstream version of “eco-pedagogy” was that it was not grounded

understand a complex, multi-faceted entity as a school through the breakdown of ethnic statistics does not feel authentic to me in the ways that I came to understand *communal school* with Angeles Workshop School and Ndindi and Scott. Rather, I lean on the storywork to give our readers impressions and information, calling us into deep listening, pause, and intuition—a process I sat in throughout the course of this research.

in place nor Indigeneity or even an acknowledgment of colonization, similar to the problem that many critical place-based and Indigenous scholars surface (i.e., Johnson, 2010; Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2019). At Angeles Workshop School, they countered this watered-down eco-pedagogy by going into their community and forming a relationship with their city. Ndindi explained:

Ndindi: “So that's how we came up with Thursday city days. We have a love for Huell Howser. And we liked his approach of talking with ordinary people, and we thought, ‘You have to be somewhere for a sustained amount of time to get what's going on’. And I think you can only learn to love and respect places if you really go, [experience them], so we thought we're going to take a field trip every Thursday and we're going to keep going back to the same places. So Olvera Street we go to twice a year if not three times a year. Many times, kids will raise their hand and be like, ‘Let's go do this, that or the other’. We wanted kids to feel secure and to connect to people, real people who are in these places. People who really work there, people who really are there. So, that's how we pushed the place-based pedagogy to make it work for an urban environment, especially one that's not just one community. It's many communities having very complex interactions with each other all the time.” (28)

In my visits to Angeles Workshop School, I saw a knowing, grown out of time and repetition, of the place and city around them, beautifully expressed in many ways, from how the students navigate the city on Thursday city days, to their collective consciousness and reciprocity to the neighbors around them, to how they speak of the land and original peoples. It gave me hope that communities of urbanized places too can create authentic places of learning, teaching, community, and relationship-building, despite the complex systems of capitalist

industrialization present there.

Hālau Kū Māna has developed a pedagogy of land that not only brings students back to the traditional practices of knowing land and stewarding land, practices such as growing *kalo* and woodworking, passed down to them by their ancestors, but it also guides students to develop awareness about the present condition of their land and the adversity it faces under settler-occupation while asking them to consider what they will do about it and how they will actively construct a future that includes a better relationship with *‘aina* (Aluli-Meyer, 2019; Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2013).

Although it is woven through many aspects of teaching and learning at the school, I saw Hālau Kū Māna's land-based curriculum most visibly in their *aloha 'aina* classes, which occur for almost the entire day on Thursdays and part of the day on Wednesday each week. Hālau Kū Māna's *aloha 'aina* education brings students at every grade level out of the classroom and not only into the outdoors but into a year-long apprenticeship to a different *papahana*, which in Hawaiian denotes a way of learning by doing or by being there. The Hālau Kū Māna website describes the Aloha 'Aina program as an educational, cultural, and political project:

- The Aloha 'Āina Education (AAE) program at Hālau Kū Māna is an essential component to the overall program. AAE places at the forefront an education grounded in native Hawaiian systems of knowledge as a critical component for learning in a heavily Westernized and colonized Hawai'i.
- AAE project days focus on specific community, academic, and cultural objectives through an aloha 'āina framework. Each grade level is based in a specific geographic location and utilizes native systems of knowledge to work collaboratively with community partners. These partnerships

collaborate to develop driving questions and culminating activities to assess and address the community's needs.

- AAE projects are where real-world and hands-on learning take place and is the site for interdisciplinary academic rigor, synthesizing traditional and modern knowledge. Through this AAE program, students build their identity as kanaka maoli and become vessels for traditional practices to live on for future generations.
- Aloha 'āina education is grounded in our agency to make pono the wrongs that must be made right and to foster healing for the Hawaiian community. AAE is a political movement that demands our existence as a public education institution in Hawai'i.

The day that Michael and the kids and I visited Hālau Kū Māna together, Trevor explained to us the various *papa* at each grade level as we stood in the grassy area outside his classroom. He pointed in the direction of each teacher's class as he spoke:

Trevor: "So you just saw Aunty U'i, our 10th-grade teacher, and 10th grade is on *Hana No'eau*. So she teaches copper making and feather work. I mean, she comes up with other stuff, but those are the two that they've been focused on. And then 11th grade is *Lo'i*, so they learned how to run the *lo'i*. Ninth grade is *Wa'a*, so they actually have a sailing canoe. And they take the bus over there and sail. And then my class is *Uka*. So it's just like anything to do with *mauka*. And her class is *Kula Kai*, but they usually go to the fishpond. And then the young guys is more like overview—how to take care of your yard. How does the whole system work?" (4)

Trevor then explained to us how the curriculum is carried out within each grade-level specific program. He revealed to us the importance of human resources and knowledge carried within

each person who is appointed to teach each program.

Trevor: “So within the idea of *Uka*, I can kinda do whatever I want. It's not really spelled out how "Hawaiian" needs to be or what that looks like. So, it's really about human resources and the people put in each position. Auntie U'i is a treasure. She just knows every Hawaiian craft from her whole life versus our wa'a people they're not wa'a people like they didn't do that before. They are just the teachers they got put in the box. So they've got to kind of figure it out. For me, there was a little thing in eighth grade that I wanted just because of all those things. The only thing I'm really used to is just growing plants because I grew up on farms and grew plants. I was like, 'Oh, that's the only project I'm going to hit, like I wouldn't know crap about a fish pond. I didn't grow up around fish or sailing or Hawaiian craft. But, I didn't recognize the way I grew up was similar to Hawaiian culture too. I took what my parents did for granted...and went to college to study this in a book and then I came here and realized, 'Oh, that stuff was actually the valuable stuff.'” (4)

As I considered what Trevor was saying, I began to recognize in a fresh way how necessary and transformative this education was for the preservation of these various types of Hawaiian knowledge, not as a mere relic of the past or as a cultural hobby, but as embedded and integrated knowledge to form the appropriate collective relationships with *‘aina*. Having this knowledge on a deeper level within a generation of learners, “activates the agency”, as the Hālau Kū Māna website states, to bring about true healing and making right the wrongs done against the Hawaiian community, with the *‘aina* as a crucial member of that community

During my second week of visiting Hālau Kū Māna, a few students, who were struggling to keep up with the distance model, had been invited by their teachers to return to campus for

small group learning. For the Aloha 'Aina block that Wednesday, Trevor asked us all to change into long sleeves and long pants and grab a pair of gloves and a small sickle from a couple of buckets he procured from a corner of his classroom and placed on the deck outside. We were going to help cut down vines, he told us. Over the week I had been there up to that point, I had heard Trevor mention how overgrown the place had become since the pandemic started. How if the students were here, he'd grab them and they would clean it up in a day. How if the older Kumu saw the current state of affairs, they would not allow it. From the way he spoke, I got the sense that caring for the land of the school *was* caring for themselves, for their community.

Sickles in hand, we headed for the banks of the stream. Trevor pointed to us how the fast-growing, invasive vines were starting to choke out many of the trees. He split us into smaller groups and assigned us to different areas. Many of the students went to work tearing and cutting down the vines. A couple of the girls gathered the cut vines into piles. I was shy and a little hesitant at first, feeling like a student on their first day. I stayed close to Makana, Trevor's student-teacher intern. I watched what Makana did and quickly was able to identify her technique. Pull the vines away first so you don't risk cutting the tree underneath, cut with your sickle while pulling the rest of the vine down to the ground. I followed suit and after a few minutes, I felt like I had the hang of it. I got into a rhythm with the work, and we mostly worked in silence. Even though there was no talking, I began to feel that sense of comfort growing out of our shared movements and didn't feel as much of an awkward stranger around the students. We helped each other with the really high vines or tough ones. We moved in unison down the

bank as one area was cleared, and we went on to the next. Before we knew it, Trevor called us to wrap up. Time had flown. The whole area he wanted to be cleared was done within half an hour. As we headed back up to the classroom, I felt the budding satisfaction of learning a new skill, having bonded with the class, and having spent time touching the earth. I wondered if the students knew how special it was for them to learn in this way. Learn by observing. Learn by doing. Learn in and through relationship with each other and with *‘aina*.

By fostering relationship with place and land, Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School embody this notion of school as communion. This process is dialogical, a conversation within each person, with other members of the community, and with the land on which they walk and work with their hands (Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2019). This form of communion with the land deepens the strength of the community, reclaims actual space and place to form authentic, living relations in replacement of colonial infrastructure and occupation, and allows these schools to exist as unique geographic sites of liberation for the community (Greenwood, 2009).

Relationships with Self & Others

School as communion involves the development of relationships along many planes, but as humans, perhaps the relationships that we feel to be foremost are the ones we have with other people and with ourselves (hooks, 2002). Many educational theorists have spoken on the importance of relationships as it pertains to teaching and learning (Freire, 1970; Darder, 2017; hooks, 2003). It is not uncommon for relationship-building to be spoken of or practiced in educational discourse and the wider education systems, especially with a focus on social-

emotional learning within the past couple of decades. However, fostering human relationships within schools of decolonizing communities takes on a deeper level of meaning (Dei, 2008; Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2013). Because an aspect of capitalist colonization is to create division among groups of people or dehumanize them into mechanisms of labor (Marx, 1844; Freire, 1970), there has been an intentional attack on relationships with self and others in the capitalist agenda. Thus, for schools such as Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School, centering their pedagogy on and within relationships as a form of humanization and decolonization is more than a standards-based lesson plan; rather, it is a radical agenda toward healing and liberation.

Real Respectful Relationships

On its website, Angeles Workshop School calls itself “a small, democratic school environment where learners grow through real-world experience and application, informed by a deep love and respect for themselves, each other, and the greater community as a whole”. In my time with Angeles Workshop, I was able to observe this dialectical notion of cultivating love and respect for oneself and others, both within their small school community and into the greater community beyond, permeating most interactions at the school. Each morning opened with all the learners and teachers (and guests, if present) sitting in a circle on the rug of their meeting room, the only room in their building that can be fully enclosed. The room was cozy and soft with worn pillows strewn haphazardly around, available for folks to sit on or hug or hide their faces behind, should that be the mood you are in on any particular day. Each morning

circle began with a moment of meditation, a chance for all to go inward and center themselves in quietness and dim lighting. Ndindi and her partner Scott, or students themselves, then led the morning circle discussion, each day's conversations were a response to scheduled activities, student topics of interest, concerns that may have arisen, moments to celebrate, or news and discussions of what is happening around them.

The conversation flowed openly; those who wanted to speak chimed in, respectfully, willingly, freely, in a rhythm that had been honed by doing that dance among the group of them over time. In spending several entire days at Angeles Workshop School, I observed the quietest and most pillow-hidden students in the morning circle to sometimes be the most animated and talkative in a teacher-guided session later in the day, only to go back to their quietude as they sit next to peers at lunch, focused on their food and maybe a show streaming on their cell phone. To me, this speaks to the freedom and love present at this school, for each human to be as they are there, many variables of self throughout the day and week. This gentle yet supporting basis for children to explore what it means to be their true selves extends into all other forms of relating to one another in the school and in various activities of learning, teaching, exploring, working, and being in community with one another. Yet, it is not easily written as a standard on paper. You have to be there. You have to experience it for yourself.

Something you can find "on paper" at Angeles Workshop School, is their Real Respectful Relationships class, which is divided into lower grades and upper grades and held alternating once a week. Ndindi and Scott designed this class out of a need to provide their students with

effective sex education, yet they recognized that to encourage young people to be informed and advocate for themselves in healthy sexual relationships, they needed to also know how to have healthy relationships in a broader sense. As Ndindi said, they “wanted it to be a very full human thing” (22). The class then expanded to include discussions of relationships of all kinds, from familial and platonic to romantic and sexual. Yet, at the basis of all interpersonal relationship learning, is an emphasis on the intrapersonal. The class that I had the privilege of attending, for example, covered neurodiversity and gave all of us the opportunity to consider and explore our own neurotype and develop our understanding and acceptance of that neuro-type, with particular care and welcome given to folks who were discovering or deepening their awareness of being neuro-atypical.

The class is co-constructed among all the teachers and learners, and students can anonymously ask questions or suggest topics for the class by writing notes and leaving them in an enclosed box. Ndindi and Scott alternate in facilitating the class and sessions can vary from being more informative and teacher-led to co-constructive and dialogical, based on the topic and student readiness to engage with the material. Despite this focus on relationships and how they function in a democratic and respectful community, Ndindi is clear that they do not force students to “be friends” with everyone. Part of the learning around relationships also includes setting boundaries and knowing when it is best to end relationships, both on a personal and collective level.

Authenticity is at the heart of how Ndindi and Scott think about relationships at Angeles

Workshop School, and they hope and expect that these experiences and skills in authentic relating have a profound effect beyond the scope of the school. Ndindi and Scott see this as a revolutionary work. By fostering students who are in touch with their humanity, who are taught to honor the dignity and humanity of others, and who are adept at forming and navigating relationships on many nuanced levels both within their communities and without, the goal is to create generations who are better equipped to work *together* in dismantling colonial patriarchy and building the authentic communities that can exist as a sustainable replacement.

One of the graduates of Angeles Workshop School, Jo, whom I had the pleasure of meeting over video call in April 2021, authored an essay about the school which can now be found on the AWS website.

Jo writes: **A place like this is not just a school. It's a thriving, loving group where we hold similar values, respect each other, and know that our interactions outside the classroom are just as important as the academics. Education truly works best when the participants form a community. The impact a close-knit community can have on the depth of learning simply cannot be understated. Education is multifaceted and closely tied to place and relationships.**

Angeles Workshop School exemplifies what real, respectful, relationships bring to the experience of education within a communal school, bolstering the academic learning by grounding interactions in respect for and true knowing of self and others.

School as Family

At Hālau Kū Māna, relationships are also central to their curriculum and organization in a way that is inseparable from Hawaiian ways of knowing and being (Aluli-Meyer, 2008; Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2013). While also humanizing and dialogical, Hālau Kū Māna does not demonstrate relationships in quite the same democratic nature that Angeles Workshop School does; rather, I observed and heard folks talk story about an ever-present organization of relationships around the family structure. In many cultures of Indigenous and collective peoples, emphasis is placed on eldership and acknowledging those who have gone before and who have obtained more experience or knowledge, or those who have inherited positions of *mana*, in the sense of respect and leadership. Yet, at Hālau Kū Māna, I observed a delicate balance that allows this dynamic to be in stark contrast to the rigid top-down structure of western colonial patriarchy, and at the heart of it, seemed to be the sense of deep respect for others and a collective conception of self rather than individualism. In this dynamic, which I had the honor to observe and experience, children are not seen as empty and useless containers to be filled and manipulated. Rather, as Trevor indicated, adults see children as bearers of their own gifts and sacred knowledge. He indicated that elders regard youth with a deep sense of care and responsibility to nurture them as the next generation and that regardless of age or skill level, folks endeavor to interact with each other in dignity and respect. I often heard adults speaking of children as an integral part of the collective whole.

In speaking to alumni of Hālau Kū Māna, a strong thread emerged from their stories in

which relationships with folks at the school are regarded as their own family. This sense of family also extends to relationships with one another, where even in academic success, the fostering of unity and accountability within peer relationships translate to collective success. Makana is a former student of the school who has now returned to intern with Trevor and plans to take over his class next year when Trevor and his family will move to Big Island. Makana shared with me about how grades and passing classes were seen as a collective action, and thus studying together and helping each other to do their best was a common practice.

Makana: “When I was here, we all had our own grades. But they would really promote getting your work done as a class. And so, because I was always ahead, I would go back, and I would help everyone, try to figure out okay, ‘This what you have to do’. And then they would have incentives. Like, ‘Oh, we’re supposed to go sailing next week. If you guys aren’t done, your whole class isn’t going.’ Everyone has the end-of-year trip. So every class goes to a different island. They either fly or go to a different part of this island. And so in my class, they told us, ‘You’re not going to sail, you’re not gonna have a trip unless there’s no one failing.’ So no matter where we were in our thing, you have to go back and you have to help your classmates.” (5)

Rather than encouraging competition among students, a practice that is prevalent and damaging in many colonizing schools, unity and collective success appeared to be central to class culture at Hālau Kū Māna. This togetherness and willingness to act as a collective unit rather than as an individual become a strength to the Hawaiian community and movement.

For any community that is struggling against settler-colonial and capitalist structures to regain autonomy and power, this struggle has to be held together with unity and the ability to

work together. Unity cannot be created without the foundation of authentic relationships. For anti-colonial schools such as Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School, the inclusion of healthy intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships with one another is a crucial element of their radical education. The way these relationships play out in complex and dynamic ways creates a beautiful portrait of the communion woven throughout these schools.

Relationships with Knowledge

In the prior two sections, relationships with land and relationships with self and other teacher-learners, I have touched on relationships with knowledge in an implicit way. In this section, I will briefly discuss how epistemology and ideology constitute another aspect of relational communion in the schools of this study. Relationship with knowledge here is presented as not only co-constructed within the community but also grounded in self-awareness and understanding of identity and positionality (McLaren, 2015). Furthermore, relationship with knowledge as an evolving dynamic and shared experience becomes a process of decolonization and liberation in schools for anti-colonial communities and their communal schools (McLaren, 2015).

Culturally and Communally Constructed

In my experiences with both Ndindi and Trevor within their science classes, it was clear to me that their teaching was grounded in their identities, not only within the Indigenous knowledges and worldviews each of them possesses but also with a unique amalgamation of their lived experiences as they have shaped their individual access points into anti-colonial and

radical discourse. Thus, for Ndindi and Trevor teaching science, a subject that is often fraught with western colonial positivism, demonstrating a relationship with scientific knowledge that is constructed in cultural identity and anti-colonial ideologies is a means to allow their students to reframe their own understandings of the world around them and thus unsettle their own relationships with knowledge.

The methods of teaching that I observed in Ndindi and Trevor's classes illustrated a decolonized relationship with knowledge and knowledge-sharing. Trevor came up to me and Makana after one of his science classes in which he had lectured to the class over a video call. Reflecting on the fact that he had been the only speaker in class for a length of time, Trevor self-assessed the appropriateness of his teaching practice before rooting himself in reassurance of the use of *mo'olelo*, or story, as native Hawaiian pedagogy:

Trevor: "In teaching school, they're always telling you like, Don't lecture too much, right? If I could redo that I would have stopped and had an activity for them to solidify what they learned. And I always feel guilty about that. But my style of lecturing is very different from some professors, you know... And so by reframing it as hale mo'olelo, I feel a lot better about talking for two hours." (5)

Pedagogy considers what type of knowledge and whose knowledge is brought into the classroom and counted as valid ways of knowing. In the first science class I observed Trevor teach, he taught us about the Native Hawaiians calculations of time and creation of calendars around the moon. He explained that since the moon controls the weather, and they observed distinct weather with each different moon cycle, Hawaiians named each month after a different

weather pattern and have 12 seasons. The ancient Hawaiian astronomers and mathematicians also accounted for the days which don't align when you add up all the 12 moon cycles and compare them to the days it takes to complete a revolution around the sun. Like many other ancient cultures, they figured out they needed to add a 13th month every third year to reset the moon calendar within the yearly calendar.

Trevor did not present this information as a historical relic included for only cultural annotation to an otherwise western positivist science curriculum. Rather, he centered the teaching from within the Hawaiian knowledges, reminding the students that their ancestors were scientists and scholars, at one point the most literate nation on earth. He added dominant-western scientific terms and concepts as an annotation to the Hawaiian ways of teaching science. To me, this was a powerful display of flipping the script.

This strategy also reminded me of the anti-colonial need to equip students with the language and awareness to speak to dominant discourse, as Delpit calls "Speaking the master's language", in order to challenge and dismantle that dominant discourse, simultaneously replacing it with the fluency of their native tongue and ideologies. *O'lelo*, or speaking, is also a crucial aspect of relating to knowledge in anti-colonial ways. If language is a vehicle for thought, and if the destruction of language has been a tool of colonization to erase Indigenous identities and knowledges, I am reminded then that the reclaiming of language as a daily practice, especially in spaces such as school, which once represented and served colonial agendas, is a revolutionary act.

Trevor always speaks passionately and energetically as he teaches, even to a screen of small boxes with students tuning in from their rooms across the island. His passion is a mixture of enthusiasm for his subject and his love of educating children. I noticed how thorough and intentional Trevor's slides are for his lesson, evidence of much time and honing his craft of curriculum and pedagogy. He engaged his students throughout the lesson, using guiding questions and discussion. The students' assignment following this lesson was to observe the weather patterns of the moon cycle they were now in and to document the evidence, such as wind or rain, that they observed. No one would be able to find fault with the rigor or engagement present in his class, I observed, a thought that seemed relevant in the face of a dominant educational landscape that seems to regard all non-western originated information systems and teaching methods, especially within a discipline such as science, as less rigorous and valid.

I observed the same attention to detail, rigor, and engagement in Ndindi's science classes. In one class, Ndindi had a detailed slideshow on the screen about thermodynamics with several linked videos. The students followed along by answering questions on worksheets in their binders. Though those elements of the lesson may be found in just about any science class in any school, this was not an ordinary science lesson. I observed that the relationality among the teachers and learners that is a part of the essence of this entire communal school was ever-present here in this teacher-led session on thermodynamics. I watched as the five students of the class and Ndindi were engaged in a playful yet intellectual debate, primarily student-led,

about the colonization of other planets, some students chiming in with theories of symbiosis, some students chiming in with admonitions against any form of colonization. Eventually, Ndindi offered the notion of *terra nullius* for contemplation by all, before gently redirecting the students back to the math problem they were solving on their worksheet. As Ndindi teaches, she exuded an enthusiasm that to me felt genuine yet calm, almost as though she was experiencing the most innocent and pure joy in this act of teaching and learning communally. I witnessed that knowledge in this class was truly co-constructed, with room for students to play around with ideas, and challenge one another's perspective while having the opportunity to receive guidance from a humanizing yet critical mentor in Ndindi who demonstrates an ideology of Indigenous and collective worldviews.

In Ndindi's words, the provision of rigor and skills of literacy is a fundamental justice issue. Ndindi and I spoke of this in the context of our experiences with other schools that claim to be "progressive" or "democratic" or even "culture-based" in a vague sense. We noted that we saw a privileged stance of some schools to do away with rigor in favor of play and freedom to explore in school. Ndindi and I shared the same sentiment that this practice was rooted in privilege and access to resources. For colonized communities in which the withholding of literacy and destruction of knowledge as a means of oppression has been a historical fact, the inclusion of and support of obtaining literacy and mastery of skills and knowledge is necessary and radical.

In Ndindi's science class, the relationships she attentively cultivated with her students

and the space for dialogue to exist within the activities for learning supported her cultivation of her students' own relationships with knowledge. It was also apparent to me that despite a difference in viewpoints that were emerging in the dialogue, the class collectively centered on an emphasis on critical self-reflection and co-construction rather than renouncing divergent ideas or disrespecting the speakers who voiced them. Though Ndindi was clearly the one modeling this behavior, the students were natural and comfortable in these practices of respectful dialogue. This entire moment demonstrated to me that there was a shared underlying belief among the students and Ndindi in the dialogical and co-constructed, yet culturally grounded, nature of knowledge.

Collective Consciousness

Relationships with knowledge at both communal schools in this study have demonstrated to me a collectively constructed nature. Yet there is an aspect beyond constructed knowledge that also emerges from the evidence. Both Trevor and Ndindi have spoken about their role as educators as having a responsibility to facilitate the growth of *collective consciousness*. This notion of consciousness speaks to a need to make a critical number of folks aware of hidden truths and social realities because the awareness of such realities is a catalyzing force for critical movement (Freire, 1970).

Trevor, as he spoke to me and Michael about the Hawaiian Kingdom one day next to the Hālau Kū Māna stream, explained the criticality of expanding awareness among the Hawaiian community about their true status in their homelands:

Trevor: “All we need to do is have only one to three or five percent of Hawaiians who understand that we are free, you know, emancipation of the mind, right? So our school is simply just trying to, like the Matrix, pull the plug out everybody's head: ‘You're already in the Hawaiian Kingdom.’ We don't need anything to happen. You're already here and this is your land. And if you were to go and try and start growing *kalo* right there, they can't stop you because their laws allow you to do that because they copied our law...They literally copied and pasted kingdom law into the US Statutes. And I'm like, ‘How come we don't do this tomorrow? We got 150 people and we can bang this out tomorrow.’ But then after tomorrow, it's Saturday and because it's not a school day, because they don't believe in what we're doing, we're missing them. So Hālau Kū Māna has just been trying to build a critical capacity to a critical mass.” (4)

As I reflect on Trevor's words, I am reminded yet again why I came into education, and the power of critical collective consciousness that I was introduced to through the writings of Paulo Freire. Much of our social realities could change rapidly if enough of us believed the same thing and worked together to simply refuse the current status quo and replace these oppressive systems with something more authentic, reciprocal, and liberating for all. Ndindi and I shared several conversations in which this Freirean nation of consciousness and freedom emerged.

Ndindi: “I think the foundational theoretical stuff has to do with, like freedom in a real sense, like, Freirean kind of freedom, which is you know, people have to build and like, really, fundamentally understand their condition, so they can do something about it. And that can't just be easily done with a pamphlet or preaching at people or whatever. So, it's like, ‘What kind of education fosters deep thought?’” (20)

Both Trevor and Ndindi and their schools grapple with that question every day: what kind of education fosters deep thought? As communal schools, relationships with knowledge are

dialogical and collectively formed. They are formed in a cultural and anti-colonial foundation and with an intention of fostering critical collective consciousness towards transformational action (Freire, 1970). Relationship with knowledge, therefore, is a communal act for a collective outcome.

Communal Learning

Perhaps the most central point to this chapter and this finding of *school as communion*, lies in what I am calling *communal learning*. Communal learning can be seen throughout the first section in this chapter as relationships are essential to communal learning. However, in this section, I will illustrate the way this concept particularly emphasizes a connectedness to the community beyond the campus community and the teachers, students, and admin who typically comprise learning communities in mainstream conceptions of school, which I witnessed at both schools and which Ndindi and Trevor speak of throughout their stories. What has emerged from the data gathered with Ndindi and Trevor at Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School is a portrait of communal learning that is integrally connected to many layers of communities, including geographic communities of place, cultural communities, the larger Indigenous community, a growing network of radical community-grown schools, and an intergenerational community of family members, alumni, former teachers, or teacher-learners in a non-traditional role who all play a part and are connected in crucial ways to the school. Additionally, I will present how this concept of *communal learning* also embodies a core belief of collectivity which is in direct contrast to and challenges structures of settler-colonial oppression

and divisiveness.

Of Communities

Though I have mentioned the relationship with community and place previously here I will focus on how the schools are specifically connected to community members beyond their school walls or campus. Throughout my study, I have used the word *community* in a more localized sense, even as narrowly defined as the exact number of people who are connected to each school of this study in some formal way. However, in this section, I wish to illustrate the ways in which my co-storyers have conceptualized their belonging to and participation within several other layers of community, some of which are not as geographically defined.

Hawaiian Charter Community

Hālau Kū Māna belongs to an official organization of Hawaiian charter schools, all of which are grown from the same historical movement to reclaim Hawaiian public education and all of which function legally under the same charter signed with the State of Hawaii Department of Education. As such, these schools, while different in their composition, have many shared experiences and are uniquely positioned to advocate for one another and form a collective voice within institutional or political spaces as they continue to fight for Hawaiian interests in education and community. Trevor told me the story of their birth with Auntie Ku, the “mother” of the Hawaiian Charter movement:

Trevor: “And so Auntie Kū tapped everybody’s shoulder for start these 17 focus charter schools. She laid out in our dissertation what is Education with Aloha. She inspired Noe.

And so she is the shoulder Noe and Keola stand on. And she's basically the haumea that birthed all the charter schools. And so her dissertation started in '95, before any of us were even thinking about this stuff. She defined what is Hawaiian education.” (5)

In other conversations, Trevor has mentioned this network of Hawaiian charters coming together to march to Iolani Palace in protest, to send folks to Mauna Kea in protest, to organize educational projects such as the stream clean-up day that Trevor helps to spearhead. As smaller and more underfunded schools, they often rely on one another for critical mass. This is true also within the student government organization, Ke Ea, that Trevor is a founder of, and which is open to students of all the Hawaiian charter schools. While Trevor suggests that of all the schools, Hālau Kū Māna is the most progressive and politically active, it is apparent throughout his conversations, that this network of schools with their shared lineage, form an important community of solidarity and kinship to one another.

Indigenous Education Community

Beyond the Hawaiian charter network, Hālau Kū Māna also sees itself as connected to the larger network of Indigenous schools and education programs all over the earth. As such, they seek to be in relationship and reciprocity with many such schools and programs, through visits, exchanges, and coming together in conferences and other organized movements. Trevor storied some of his experiences with Hālau Kū Māna and the greater Indigenous network to me, including having his students participate in a daylong conference modeled after the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:

Trevor: “It was cool because the students like it was our team, Ke Ea, plus some, you

know, who's who in Kamehameha schools, but they let us kind of run things. And then Mililani, Trask spent 30 years in Washington DC in New York, trying to pass the actual UNDRIP came and mentored us on this. And she was there that day. And she gave the closing words. But for our organization, it was just like, Hey, this is our Manifesto.” (6)

Trevor and his students in Ke Ea, his after-school student government organization, also were able to participate with other Indigenous nations and their students to ratify the manifesto and bring it to other nations by joining the Hokule'a which has rebuilt and restored Pasifika canoe sailing practices and sailed around the world. The manifesto reached New Zealand across the Pacific, went through the Indian Ocean and eventually ended up in New York at the UN. These experiences solidified their identity, even as a small school and an after-school organization, within the Indigenous education network around the globe.

Makana and Trevor both told me stories of exchange visits they have hosted for many other Indigenous schools or Indigenous communities interested in starting schools of their own. In this way, Hālau Kū Māna has long served as a shining example of what is possible for many communities who desire an authentic communal school of their own. In these exchanges, the visiting schools may prepare a presentation of cultural ceremony, song or dance for the Hālau Kū Māna students who would then respond with a *hula* for the visiting group. As members of a greater Indigenous education network all over the earth, Hālau Kū Māna attends to its responsibilities and reciprocity with many other Indigenous communities and schools.

Small School Community

Ndindi has spoken to me several times about her connection to other small, democratic schools and the exchanges that Angeles Workshop School has with other such schools in that network. Ndindi seeks to connect as much as possible with Indigenous schools and Indigenous educators, but she also has described to me a network of relationships that is much broader within the democratic or progressive school community. I was able to witness such an exchange as I participated with Angeles Workshop School last October, in which they used video call to connect their students to a small, progressive school in Mexico. The students of both schools introduced themselves and then engaged in several games and activities over the computers to foster a sense of camaraderie. Even during the pandemic, I gathered the importance for folks of both schools to see others participating in education in a similar form to theirs, ones which defies dominant conventions. Ndindi and Scott often draw from such exchanges, or the literature produced by educators within such innovative spaces to inform their own conversations around practices and possibilities within their own school.

Academic Community

With both Trevor and Ndindi being members of academia, Ndindi a Ph.D. and Trevor, along with several other educators at Hālau Kū Māna, a doctoral candidate, I saw their schools as members also of a research community, though not in a broad way, but rather through invitation and relationship. My presence as a co-researcher in their schools was not unique to either school community, both Ndindi and Trevor voicing to me a sense of responsibility for

those who are curious and questioning about alternatives to dominant settler education systems to come learn with them. However, they see themselves in gatekeeping roles, allowing access to those whom they feel will respect and benefit their own communities, foreground Indigeneity and anti-colonial agendas, and contribute to the greater conversation of doing community schools in a reciprocal and contextual practice.

Intergenerational

A special aspect of *communal learning* that I got to witness at both schools was the learner-teacher community extending into an intergenerational sense beyond the enrolled students and their teachers. Family members are not only given opportunity to learn alongside their children, but they are also welcomed into the school as knowledge-bearers and teachers of unique skills and lived or cultural experiences. Additionally, students who have attended these schools in the past and are now alumni are also viewed as being still connected to the schools in unique roles. Much of the hopes for sustained transformation is placed on their shoulders to act as disseminators of the education they received and change-agents in each their own way.

Trevor storied the impact that including the parents and families of the Hālau Kū Māna students has had on the community, a particular form of healing and release of shame:

Trevor: “I’ve pushed hard for having a family day, every quarter. And one family day, we didn’t really know what to do with it. I was like, ‘Let’s just straight up let our parents be stupid. Just one day.’ And you know, you can take the shame away by just letting them choose five different classes, workshops. I got to teach my moon lesson to parents. And that’s actually why they come to Hālau Kū Māna is because they want to be a student,

but they're never gonna admit it. They cannot make time for it. So we forced them. We're like, 'This is a requirement. You have to come.' So I did another talk on how to do land research. They were just like, 'Oh, my gosh, this is amazing.'" (6)

This experience is particularly impactful when we consider the historical events that many of this generation's parents have endured in having their cultural knowledge stripped from them and their cultural identity demeaned by the settler colonial society, including many of the public schools they attended. For them to learn Hawaiian language, knowledge, ritual, and *oli* alongside their children or from the background, gives them a chance to reclaim what was taken from them without having to face the shame of not having had such prior cultural knowledge. Trevor explained to me that this dynamic is furthered when parents are brought in as experts in particular areas, though teachers have needed to relationally foster trust and encourage parents to step into a teacher-like role:

Trevor: "I already told one student that we want to come visit your family because their staff came in and landscaped this hillside going down because they're the experts. So we definitely got to go there. A year before, I had a family that has a *lo'i* on the other side or a family that has connections to this place or that so whenever there's parents that I know would be okay with sharing, then we go. But I've also asked, 'Hey, does anybody wanna teach?' But then there's just nobody arrogant enough to be like, 'Yeah, I'll teach the class for a day.' So you have to ask, yeah, you kinda have to know what they do." (9)

Ndindi shared with me a similar story of encouraging family members past the intimidation of teaching class for a day and accessing the personal expertise and knowledge within each parent:

Ndindi: "Actually, every single person's parents are not even encouraged, we're pretty

much like, ‘So we’re coming to your job in December. Are you ready for that?’ Very encouraging. Because we also want to empower parents” (20)

Angeles Workshop School has developed a program they call Expert Enthusiasts in which they invite parents and other community members to come to the school (or in pre-pandemic times, they may have taken the school to visit the Expert Enthusiast in their own space). The role of the Expert Enthusiast is to introduce a particular story or piece of knowledge that is intrinsic to that person or to their work. (For example, in 2019, Ndindi invited me to be an Expert Enthusiast and she asked me to share what it meant for me to be Hakka with her students.) No matter what a parent’s background is, Ndindi will use her conversation skills to find out what their unique skill set or story is that can be brought into the students. This allows students to not only receive a broad spectrum of information and cultural stories that might not otherwise be shared in school, but also to shape how they see others as bearers of knowledge. To call many people of diverse status and backgrounds an Expert Enthusiast is to humanize and dignify people in a particular way.

Through this research, I saw that including the parents and family members in roles of both teacher and learner (Freire, 1970) at these communal schools brought education into an intergenerational and ongoing process. Rather than limiting parents to the fringes of school as is standard within the dominant deficit-model paradigm, parents were brought into the community as members who hold a particular value. Students who experience such intergenerational learning were allowed to see and value knowledge as emerging from many

contexts and lived experiences (Capra & Luisi, 2018). They also were able to conceptualize learning as not a process that is limited to the K-12 or college years, but rather as an organic, perpetual exchange within one's communities and families (Capra & Luisi, 2018).

Graduates & Former Students

At both schools, graduates also hold a special space. Because both schools work to develop deep and authentic relationships with their students while they attend those schools, the lasting nature of those relationships appears to me to be a testament to the effectiveness of their community building. I had the honor to get to know Angeles Workshop School graduate, Jo, and Hālau Kū Māna graduates, Makana, Caeden, and Kaleo. Makana is one of a handful of students who have returned to Hālau Kū Māna since graduating to fill a teacher capacity. In speaking with Makana, it was apparent to me that Hālau Kū Māna has greatly shaped who she is today and her desire to serve as a teacher there now is rooted in her ongoing sense of place and belonging within the school.

I met Caeden and Kaleo, two recent graduates of Hālau Kū Māna one day at lunch when they walked up to the picnic tables outside Trevor's classroom while most of the teachers were gathered for their lunch break. As they walked across the grass towards us, Trevor broke out into a huge smile when he saw them, and they reciprocated with their own happy faces and enthusiastic greetings. They were here to see Trevor, one of their "favorite teachers". Caeden and Kaleo caught up with Trevor while I sat back and observed, and it was clear the rapport among them was natural and affectionate. Once Trevor introduced us, he encouraged the

young men to speak with me and share their experiences of the school with me for the research I was doing. Caeden and Kaleo seemed eager to oblige. In that conversation, they made it clear to me how much they regarded all of their teachers here as family members, uncles and aunties. For both, their senior *Papahana* teacher was a father figure, someone they described as strict yet loving, expecting them to become the best versions of themselves. Kaleo described this sense of family he felt at the school:

Kaleo: “The connection I had with every teacher was strong. I felt like every teacher around here was my parent or like my auntie or uncle and everyone one was watching me. I knew they loved us a lot. But then the days that we would work in a stream and everything, I felt like I was doing something for my *ohana* and I saw my school is my family. So I felt like if I did this then I'm giving back something, like what they teach me, I give back my hard work. I felt that way until I graduated and after I graduated, I continued that mindset.” (12)

It was clear to me that for these graduates, the experience of family and belonging that permeate their memories of school here, bring them back continually to be a part of the Hālau Kū Māna community even after they have graduated. Additionally, they all expressed a responsibility to the teaching they received, to their teachers at Hālau Kū Māna, and to the greater Hawaiian community to each play their own part, carry out their *kuleana*.

Jo, a graduate of Angeles Workshop, met with me over video call in May of 2021. They were the only person to respond to my ask for socially distanced interviews; my conversation with them was a buoy of hope in a long year of pandemic pause. Jo shared with me how integral

their experience at Angeles Workshop School had been on their formation of agency and ideology as they transitioned into the world. Jo referred me to an essay they had written about the school which now lives on the AWS website. Jo, as a senior in high school, writes:

Scott and Ndindi are the co-founders of the school I will graduate from in June. They have created a community that perfectly exemplifies a healthy, good school culture. A large part of this comes from their roles not just as teachers and educators, but as peers and friends....This community is not just a school. We get to know our teachers as people, and I personally count Scott and Ndindi as lifelong friends and mentors. We experience adventures together, and the experiences of nonacademic togetherness are created by two people who genuinely love what they do...On sunny days, we'll walk to the park and have lunch. This connection and love — yes, love — supports the academics and the studies that we participate in during the school day, and imbues the classes with an energy rarely found in high schools.

Ndindi spoke to me of Jo and other graduates as part of the school community to this day:

Ndindi: “And also important is having relationships that are not based on: ‘You have a child here’. So alumni, Jo has been gone for three years. Jo plays D&D with Scott once a week. They are always like participating and everything.” (20)

Ndindi and Trevor both see the graduates of their school as a critical part of the radical visions of their schools. Trevor explained his thoughts to Ndindi and me:

Trevor: “I was just doing inventory. I mean, we're not teaching for a paycheck and we're not teaching blindly and just like, you know, then take these babies and throw them to the wind and hope they survive. We have a continued relationship with our students forever. And I'm hoping that they're going to staff the next schools. They know that that's an expectation. It's not like a hope. It's like, ‘If you're not coming back for teach

here, then you better have something else good that you're doing.' We're gonna have 3 of our 14 staff will be alumni next semester. I think that that makes it more appealing for more to come back. I wouldn't be surprised to get to like 50% in the near future. As long as we just continue to urge them and look at this as this is how we grow. You come back and the rest of you go out. I think to grow human resource, the best way is to be a teacher and to be explicit. I think for a while I was just like, 'Good luck. I hope you do well in the world.' And now I just say it like, 'You better come and work here. And there's nothing else to it.'” (26)

Trevor’s story shows a journey towards increased expectation of their graduates and a confidence to put that responsibility on them to contribute to the school and movement’s sustainability. This story also speaks to a paradigm shift in the preparation and recruitment of teachers as ones who are internal to the communities they serve and are prepared to be educators not merely through technical training programs but in sustained relationship and internship to the communities they both receive education from and return to impart education into, a model that speaks to the ethics-development of future teachers posed by Freire (1998).

Ndindi responded to Trevor in this conversation with her own thoughts on the role and responsibility the alumni of these schools to continue this work:

Ndindi: “So I think there's something there as well. If we are to have the kind of school that we support not just the handful of human beings who are in the building, if we want this thing, we all have to like to participate in it. And maybe you're not going to be a teacher, but you are going to do something in your community. All of these questions you've been talking about and thinking about, it just can't be that you went to a school that had no homework and you had good times. It surely has to be more than that. And I

think that's something we always push forward. I think it has to have a long commitment, which I think is very much an Indigenous kind of perspective that it's not just about us ephemeral beings right now, right here. It's very much a learning commitment and commitment to each other, commitment to our land. If I can't teach anything, if there's nothing people can get out of what we do, there's got to be at least that. So, that's what we hope for in our work.” (26)

Here, I see the ways in which Ndindi and Trevor conceptualize their communities as much more complex and expansive than that of dominant educational discourse. In their stories, relationships seem to be central to the organization and existence of their *communal schools* (Dei, 2002; hooks, 2003). These relationships and roles do not appear to begin and end with the school year, nor are they confined only within the classroom for the purpose of making it through a lesson plan. Rather, these schools demonstrate service to families, graduates, and many wider communities in relationships of reciprocity, service, and ongoing communion.

Cultural Memory Making

Ndindi, Trevor, and I discussed that an important part of the formation of communities are the routines and rituals they share. The schools in allowing opportunity for the diverse community members— teachers and learners, families, and graduates—to come together in collective cultural memory making became another way that I was able to witness these schools illustrating the concept of communion. Collectively constructing culture through shared activity and routines in the schools became a way that the communities drew from their passed-down cultures, but also could commune, dialogue, and negotiate a culture that was contextual

to its people and place, yet reflective of their transformation and evolving collective consciousness. These processes seem crucial to doing a decolonizing work that aims to reclaim language, culture, and knowledge, yet also acknowledges the dynamic and polyethnic nature of Indigenous and collective cultures.

At both Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School, mornings began with a whole-school ritual, each grounded in spiritual practice and communion. Hālau Kū Māna began morning protocol with an *oli*, a native Hawaiian chant. Angeles Workshop School began their morning circle with a moment of meditation. Hālau Kū Māna then gave the floor to a different student speaker each morning to share a piece of their learning in a presentation to the whole school. This was followed by announcements. At Angeles Workshop School announcements and group conversation flowed more democratically, often in dialogue to negotiate present concerns within the school community or to process news and current events as a group. At both schools, these morning rituals cultivated a culture of unity, mindfulness, and togetherness.

Routines could also take on a more mundane appearance yet still served an important role in shaping the cultural values of the place. For example, at Angeles Workshop School, mornings were also a time for doing assigned chores simultaneously. Each student was given a responsibility to complete daily, without prompting and guidance. As these tasks are conducted, to me as an observer it was clear to see that many small parts contribute to the well-being of the whole. For the students, they may have occasionally grumbled through it or tried to

get away without doing it, but as soon as the trash cans overflowed or carpets remained dirty, I observed a collective dialogue would emerge to remind the group of the importance of each person doing their part.

At Hālau Kū Māna, character and values were similarly instilled through shared routines, one of the most notable to me, was the lining up of slippers outside the classroom. Chores and tasks were also assigned in similar ways as at Angeles Workshop School, but the stories I heard told about routines and opportunities for collective correction and memory-making often seemed to revolve around the slippers. I have come to learn that the wearing of slippers is a hallmark “Hawaiian thing”, and the removal of footwear before entering a classroom is a preservation of traditional Hawaiian values in education. Trevor spoke to me about the slippers during a story where he told about two elder kumu who have held roles of being the “sharks on campus” but were also the big brother and father figures to most staff and students. They were the ones always making sure that the values of discipline and precision are instilled into the students:

Trevor: “They just keep everything in order. There'd never be weeds on this gravel trail or weeds popping out of the showers. Luckily all the slippers are lined up. But we call them the slipper fairies, because if there's any slippers out of order, they go in a stream.”

(5)

To some who are not from cultures who practice this kind of discipline, throwing slippers in the stream may seem harsh. But here, it was not without purpose nor underlying collective meaning and respect, which Trevor explained: **“That's why the kids respect him is because he's**

the only one that ever calls them out for the shit.” (12) I listened to Trevor speak more on the significance of lined-up slippers and how practicing discipline was connected to other sacred rituals of Hawaiian culture:

Trevor: “That's how we get the whole school lined up every single morning. Like we line up rank and file. We march up to the top. Protocol looks good. Nobody dares scratch a face during the oli, hands down.” (5)

I had gathered some sense just from observation of the sacred nature of *oli* and carrying out protocol, and so I could understand why these kumu, the “sharks”, who many on campus regard as the loving but strict father figures, would insist on such discipline and regard when carrying out these rituals. In a later conversation Trevor further explained:

Trevor: “The more important part of Hawaiian education is the values...And I define values being cleaning, lining up your slippers. You know, respecting the teacher, turning your chair to face the teacher... You could not have a messy school and call it a Hawaiian school. To me, being clean is more important than just all of the curriculum, any amount of what I have to teach.” (12)

It wouldn't be until one of my last conversations with Trevor in September on the school campus, that I heard Trevor speak more explicitly about the significance of these rituals and the underlying Hawaiian values and beliefs, connected to a very real grounding in spirituality and the spiritual practices that are sustained and held sacred at Hālau Kū Māna.

Trevor: “And that's why that just doesn't work if the slippers are not lined up, doesn't work if there's leaves all over, because you can't seriously interact with another realm.” (15)

For Trevor and the Hālau Kū Māna community, as practitioners of Hawaiian spirituality,

Hawaiian values of discipline, order, and cleanliness are real requirements for them to carry out their spiritual communion and *kuleana* to the realm of higher powers.

While I will further discuss the aspect of spirituality in both schools in the next chapter (See Chapter 8-Power as Spirit), here I will summarize the importance of having these *experiences* available to students as they gather a sense of what culture can look like and feel like within their community in a way that contests the individualism and loss of cultural identity in a settler-colonial society. I saw that these rituals and cultural values were reiterated and cultivated, but not at the expense of the student's agency and dignity (See "Safe Spaces" in this chapter). Rather, they were grounded in relationship, trust, shared experiences, and ongoing member-checking to weigh out the experiential value they add to the community. In this way, I understood these diverse school communities were employing collective cultural memory making as a decolonizing and unifying process of communion.

Contextual & Personal

Another finding emergent from the data was this notion that communal schools such as Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School, grown from people and places which comprise them, cannot serve as examples for replication. According to the principles of place/land-based and community-grown, these schools are fundamentally a result of the specific and dynamic ways in which their people interact contextually and co-construct their own version of school to best serve their community. As such, both Ndindi and Trevor argued that there can never be another Hālau Kū Māna or Angeles Workshop School. They urged other communities who

desire to do a similar work or embark on a similar journey, to understand that the conceptualization and construction of a school must necessarily answer to the needs of the people and places of that specific community. This is the only way to truly embody this notion of *school as communion* and to serve as sites of authentic learning, humanization, healing, and liberation for that particular community.

When I first walked into Angeles Workshop School, the first room I entered is Scott's classroom. Every time I entered this space, my eyes would travel up and down the industrial workshop shelves that line the walls of the room, usually landing on something new each time, as they were packed full of Star Wars figurines and other characters, layered in rows and in front of bins of art supplies. Above them, Star Wars posters and revolutionary paraphernalia filled up the little bit of wall that was not covered by shelves. At a lower level, small bookshelves were filled with revolutionary texts. This room is Scott, a self-proclaimed geek who loves to tinker and make crafts. Many of the students here had an affinity to similar interests as Scott and I could imagine how at home they must feel here among things that reflected who they each were.

Jo wrote about Scott and Ndindi's presence in the school: "Scott's eyes light up when creating a tabletop role-playing game based on what we learned in our Cold War unit, and Ndindi opens a Loot Crate with the school frequently." The authentic selves that Ndindi and Scott have brought into the school, had a clear impact on the students as they experimented each day with finding and expressing their own authentic selves. For Ndindi, this freedom to exist as they are within the

school they created, was an intentional practice of self-care and humanization for themselves, as they liberated themselves from dominant school practices. She explained to me:

Ndindi: “A huge part of it is I stopped wanting to be a manager of kids. It was not just about students, it was also about our inner lives as creative people, as thoughtful people, as people who want to contribute to the world. Grading 200 chemistry assignments– how is that supportive? When our time and the conversations we’re having a class might be better if we go a different way. Now, I’m still very busy. But I have a different kind of busyness, which is more directly connected to what students want and need, and what I want.” (20)

As a radical community activist, many of the things that Ndindi wanted and that she actively created were elements of her community work and activism. One lengthy conversation Ndindi and I had together at the school was spent in the meeting room, both of us filling bags with socks and other supplies for Ndindi to hand out later that day with her organization that serves their unhoused neighbors in Palms. Other days, Ndindi was preparing for a social justice haunted house that she and other community activists were organizing for the community to experience over Halloween weekend. I was always amazed at the creativity and conviction Ndindi displayed in every corner of her life, fully embodying the spirit of a community worker. This version of Ndindi was whole and present at Angeles Workshop School, thus, the school took on much of the spirit and passion and radical conviction that she brings into each space she enters.

In Trevor’s classroom at Hālau Kū Māna, I also saw elements of the personal form of education that was unique to Trevor. Buckets of planting and yard working tools tucked away in

the corner. Sleep mats on a shelf that he uses when his two young children come to camp out with him in his classroom. A make-shift studio in front of his classroom library where he and students and alumni film a Hawaiian Kingdom student news show broadcast on social media; Trevor a former journalism major, as teacher has passed down his passion and skills of journalism to his students. There were posters and stickers for Ke Ea in various places. Trevor began Ke Ea with two other *kane*, one an educator and one a leader in the Hawaiian Kingdom. Trevor's own history as a product of the student government program in his high school informs his work now as an educator who has brought student government to Hālau Kū Māna and other Hawaiian charter schools within their network.

Trevor: “I started Student Council in high school, like across all the islands. There's a State Student Council, with members from every island and got to do a lot of that. So I was in education a lot. I used to go to board of education meetings in high school. And that's why I started this student council because the charter high schools don't have student activities. We don't have a robust sports or music council government. And everybody that was on that council is now in the real government. My peers that I was sitting next to ran for office. And then like four of them got elected to our legislature. And I'm like, ‘This is why Hawaiians don't run the government, because this is programmed, training everybody else to do it.’ So Ke Ea Hawaii is designed to train those kind of leaders.” (1)

It was clear to me in so many of my observations and interactions that neither of the two schools would be what it was without the people who make it. Each teacher brings their life experience, passion, knowledge, and *mana* to the school to serve and co-construct in a specific

way.

I have already discussed in many ways how each school is contextual to the places they inhabit (See Relationships with Land/Place), so I will only remind us here that the contexts of place also serve to make each school distinct and irreplicable. Angeles Workshop school seems to me to have found a way through their urban context to provide an education and create a school that could exist only in Palms, CA. In their own way, Hālau Kū Māna is one of several small Hawaiian charter schools, yet they too appear to be a unique reflection of where they are geographically situated, along with the *mo'olelo* and families of that place, and of the people who have grown that school over the past few decades and those present now who continue to shape and evolve the school in a dynamic context.

This finding suggests that educational discourse should move away from looking at other school examples as models to copy or package into distributable curriculum and organizational plans. Rather, in the principle of *school as communion*, there is a unique opportunity for each community, however defined by the people who form it, to dialogue with one another and to draw from the context of the place and their relationships with the land they inhabit, to create schools that intricately reflect the needs, personalities, and characteristics of the people and places which make them.

Humanizing

Humanizing education is a concept that emerged in many ways throughout the data. *School as communion* is grounded in the idea of intimate exchange and sharing, notions which

evoke the human experience. In conversation with one another, Ndindi, Trevor, and I shared a sense that to be human, among other things, is to seek belonging and safety, places and people with whom we can share ourselves and feel understood and accepted. As Freire and other humanizing educational theorists have written, to humanize ourselves and others is to undo the effects of colonization, a power which constantly threatens and harms our humanity. Humanizing education, then, is a decolonizing education. And *school as communion* exemplifies the radical possibilities for schools to exist as sites of collective humanization. Both Angeles Workshop School and Hālau Kū Māna demonstrated to me humanizing education by existing as spaces of belonging, safety, transformation, and places to explore our full selves in authentic ways, including ourselves as spiritual beings (Dei, 2008; hooks, 2003).

Belonging

For school to be a place of communion, in my conceptualization then, is for school to be a place of belonging. It is in the shared experience of belonging, that trust is established towards the sharing of one's vulnerable and authentic self. To be your authentic self is a humanizing experience. I not only witnessed but personally experienced profound moments of belonging, even as an outsider and a researcher, within both schools in this study. While I will expand on the theme of *belonging* further and in an expanded way in Chapter 9, here I will briefly illustrate how cultivating belonging is a facet of the humanizing education present at Angeles Workshop School and Hālau Kū Māna.

Access to each school is the first entry point to belonging. As a public charter school,

Hālau Kū Māna is free and accessible to any child who wishes to attend, both Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian. Theoretically, as a physical site, there is a cap to how many students can attend at a given time. However, Trevor revealed to me that in his 15 years of teaching at the school, they have never reached their cap nor had to turn students away. Students and families did apply to the school and this process served as a conversation to see if they are a mutual fit. Because the school was so unique and focused on its vision as a radical Hawaiian school, they recognized that they may not be the right community for everyone. Yet for the families and students who were seeking such a community, one immersed in Hawaiian culture and values, Hālau Kū Māna was accessible and welcoming to those who chose to be a part of it and to learn there with respect and eagerness. Members of the school staff and community actively cultivated a sense of belonging towards all members once they had joined the school. Trevor spoke of the staff, the aunties and the uncles who welcomed him since his first day, though he still had much to learn about Hawaiian education:

Trevor: “Most everybody else was just like instant: ‘Come on in. You’re welcome. Thank goodness you teach math’. So, every prep period, I used to go to Hulu. I used to dance with the kids and make a fool of myself and trying to learn the *oli* with them. Yeah, the Hulu teacher and I are teaching partners but he’s way more expert than me. So basically, I’m just a student.” (12)

Though Angeles Workshop School was a private tuition-based school, they endeavored in every way possible to make their school accessible to all who really wanted to be a part of their community and who aligned with the community vision and culture. The school was based on a

sliding scale of tuition and transparency, so those who were able to pay full price recognize that this was their role in contributing to the existence of the school and in balancing resources in such a way that the families who cannot afford to pay the full price may also attend. Ndindi had informed me that they had never had to turn down a student based on inability to pay the tuition and they had never had to accept students who may not be a good fit for the school, just because they can afford to pay full price. The school relied on its democratic process of dialogue and relationship building in an ongoing way to determine alignment within the community. Access to the school was then granted to new families based on that collective sense of alignment and relationships with one another:

Ndindi: “So we have good relationships with our families. They're usually here because they're seeking something out. And usually, students come into a shadow day. Often, parents come around a little bit shy, but then come around again, and are like ‘Okay’. For Shadow Day, before someone walks into the door, a lot of work has happened, usually. But we say ‘We don't accept one student, we accept families. So, it means these are the principles of how it runs. You don't have to love all of it, but you kind of have to agree that this is what we're doing as a family. And that's worked really beautifully. Our families are super supportive. They're the ones who bring in other people.” (20)

At both schools, access was not based on test scores, family status, bloodline, or economics. Rather, the doors were opened in an organic way, relying on communion and relationship building, to welcome those who truly belonged in that community, through shared interests, respect, values, and commitment to their vision and focus.

Safe Space

Related to the notion of belonging, was this idea of safe space for the members of their community that I observed at both schools. This notion is especially impactful as we consider the intersectional identities of the folks within each school community as it pertains to historical marginalization or oppression within a capitalist and settler-colonial structure. At Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School, I was able to witness and experience the safety and belonging to be authentically yourself, welcoming in all genders, sexualities, races, neurotypes, abilities, interests, socio-economic status, traumas, status, and other intersectionalities. These schools as safe spaces offered opportunities to share these identities with one another, to heal from trauma, and to find belonging and humanity with one another.

Trevor told me that the school has been a safe haven of sorts for students who do not feel as accepted in mainstream social structures. He shared with me the feedback that he has received over the years about students feeling safe to be themselves here and how that safety and belonging is embedded in true Hawaiian culture:

Trevor: “Usually within the first week, all of our new students tell us or tell their parents or tell their peers, ‘This is where I want to be, and this is it.’ Usually new students, they’re just like ‘I can breathe. For once at school, I can breathe and be myself.’ We’re a Hawaiian school, but it’s not like this is a regular high school, it’s more like ‘You can be a weirdo’. Because true Hawaiian culture would embrace that.” (13)

Trevor and I then discussed gender and sexuality. I was especially eager to learn how the Hālau Kū Māna community fostered inclusion and safety for all, but especially through the example of

being a home for many *mahu*, or third gender, students.

Trevor: “So one kumu is transgender. So he started at our school as a kane but he gave birth to his son and then transitioned and so he's always been a pretty good resource for all of our mahu students. And I would say at this school's like almost one out of ten is mahu. And more like one out of twenty is aware and comfortable with it by the time they leave us. And then I'd say another one out of 10 maybe, even though this is kind of a safe space, they never get to or they don't really recognize it until they graduate and then as soon as they graduate and I'll see: ‘Oh, he switched cool. Glad you figured that out, like we were trying to help you’. But that student I mentioned is I think transitioning right now and so the school doesn't know that, but he knows that. I can see that cuz I had her-him, he said we actually have two students that are trying to transition right now and he's just like, this is the safest place to do that. This school loves mahu. To us, it's like kane are here, (Trevor places one hand horizontally hovering over the desk), wahine are here, (Trevor places his other hand about 6 inches over his firsthand), and mahu above that, (he takes his firsthand and reaches at least a foot higher than his other), and you know, we all revere mahu. So it just feels like it's a really safe place and kids get that right away. Like we got bookworms, they just, you know, just want to sit. I had a girl that was just deathly afraid of everyone in sixth grade, her first year, and just sat in a corner and read a book for years. And then by senior year, she was singing on stage. Totally fine, confident, dancing hula, and starting chants and then went to Stanford. And just got to be who she wanted to be. I think she's queer, not entirely mahu. But I mean it's a safe place.” (13)

I asked Trevor how they are able to create this safety while carrying out certain Hawaiian practices, some of which, I had observed, still seemed to perpetuate binary conceptions of gender, such as asking students to line up by gender for protocol or dividing tasks in the *lo'i* by

gender. Trevor shared with me how as a community they collectively navigated these tensions to make sure all students felt included and safe in some way, while still upholding, as much as possible, the traditions as they have been preserved, grounding this practice in the values of acceptance at the heart of Hawaiian culture:

Trevor: “So specific to that kumu and the lo’i, there was: kane are doing this, wahine doing this. And they’re so much more productive, when they are grouped like that. But every year, he’d have a mahu. And he would give them a separate task. It would be a whole separate task. So I remember, everybody will distinctly remember one student just would not lift the rock, because he always just wanted to go pick things. So pretty much every day, he would tell him, make a lei for the ahu. He would just wander around all day, picking leaves and ferns and flowers and make a nice lei and put it on the ahu at the end of the day. But you do have to pick a gender at opening and closing. And I don’t see a better way to do that. Because you wouldn’t want to single out, or you wouldn’t want like boys here, girls here, across here there’s maybe one mahu at that time and no one’s gonna do that. And so I suppose we’re lining up by sex, maybe more than gender? If they’re having trouble, kumu would have already talked to them. But yeah, I think it’s an unspoken way of, ‘If you have this go in that line and if you have this go in that line’. And we’ve had a couple maybe one or two that are like, pretty clearly transition, gender-wise, but they still stand in the same sex line till they graduate. I think in a different world, you know, like, identifying at age 13-14-15 would be fine, but now that you’re still a kid until you’re 18, we just get in whichever sex line we are. And if you want to be in the other line, you can go in that line. That’s whatever. Just, pick a line.” (13)

As I listened, I considered the tensions and imperfections that Trevor was also navigating in his story yet sensed how the feeling of love and family held together the whole dynamic. I remarked

to him as I was still pondering the stories he told, “You’re right. I don’t think there would be a safer space.” Though in this study, I wasn’t able to gather stories from the students themselves (as was my initial plan), yet in my limited time with the students and participation with the community in some of these rituals, I was beginning to trust the safety they had formed here, recognizing that if one day a *mahu* student, or any student really did not feel safe in some way, there would be conversation and care in changing things to make the school more inclusive for them.

At Angeles Workshop School, the freedom with which students expressed their various intersectionalities, was also apparent in almost every space and activity within the school. Because I was able to be at the school while students were present, I was able to experience how the students really bring the school to life with their own personalities. My first observation was that most of the students simply existed with a freedom to be themselves. This was striking to me at first, in a way that made me examine how deeply colonized my own mind is. I am accustomed to students taking on a certain demeanor at school, perhaps if I really troubled that notion, I expected students to be more submissive. Here there was little no evidence of that behavioral conditioning or coercion. Students spoke freely, often whatever entered their minds. Exclamations about sex or other topics that may hold a shock value in a dominant institutional space were frequent. Yet there was an absence of shame or correction. That is not to say there was no gentle redirection or guidance towards a common goal given by the teachers when needed, organically calling for distractions to subside. I was humbled as I watched the teachers

of Angeles Workshop School model the construction of safe yet structured space for all their students.

I saw that inclusion and safety at Angeles Workshop School were central to their identity as a school. For many students who had sought out Angeles Workshop School, it was because dominant schools did not work for them, often in traumatic or harmful ways. Ndindi shared with me how their school had become a safe haven for students of diverse race, class, gender, sexuality, and neuro-type, and ability. In conversation with Ndindi, we agreed that access has been an area of criticism for alternative school models with many small schools not choosing to welcome or accommodate students with disabilities or atypical neurotypes. Angeles Workshop School aimed to be a counter-narrative to this. One student with a physical disability attended school daily with his service dog. Other students of diverse neuro-type seemed to have found safety at Angeles that they had not at other schools, as Ndindi explained: **“With Scott and his kind of the way he approaches art, and working with kids on the spectrum, we have all sorts of people who come just for: Oh, my kids on the spectrum” (23).** Scott as a teacher who is on the spectrum and his advocacy for others on the spectrum illustrated another beautiful way in which representation fostered safety and belonging at Angeles Workshop School.

Another aspect of safe space I witnessed at Angeles Workshop School was a regard for the sacred to emerge within their community. Ndindi expressed to me that there were certain stories she will not share with folks outside of their community because those stories belong only to the folks who were there, who lived the complexity, and who have formed the deep

relationships of love and trust to allow such experiences to emerge. Ndindi described this sacred protection of their humanity:

Ndindi: “It's a us thing against everything around us that says that we should not relate to each other in these very deeply human ways at least in the ways that we're trying. I think that's why it's sacred because there's no sharing of that story that doesn't chip away at the level of thoughtfulness, love, deep respect for each other's humanity that every single person involved had to be committed to doing.” (24)

I came to understand that to exist within a school community that creates safety for all its members to be their authentic selves is truly a humanizing experience, one formed in the collective endeavor to decolonize and reclaim our intersectional identities. Angeles Workshop School and Hālau Kū Māna have demonstrated that you cannot have a truly humanizing education as a facet of being a *communal school* unless you are actively creating safe spaces and belonging for all your members.

Transformative

Another aspect of humanizing education is a transformative aspect (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2003; Patel, 2016). Dei (2002) describes transformative learning as: “education that is able to resist oppression and domination by strengthening the individual self and collectives to deal with continued reproduction of colonial and re-colonial relations in academic institutions” (p.1). Rather than relying on what Freire calls *banking* education (1970), both Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School embodied a pedagogy that foregrounds the transformational nature of a human, both to transform within themselves through the increasing awareness,

knowledge, and skills; and to contribute to the transformation of their communities towards justice, healing, and peace (Freire 1970, 1998).

Apprenticeship as Decolonization

Beyond dominant-structured curriculum which emphasizes textbook learning and text literacy, both of our *communal schools* offered opportunities for students to master hands-on skills. This format of learning reminded me of apprenticeship in pre-industrialized societies and still found in many decolonizing and collective cultures. Not only did I witness and experience the healing, decolonizing, and enjoyable aspects of learning embodied within working with one's hands in the act of creation, but I also saw a potential for community transformation within such a learning and work. Ndindi and I spoke about this potential in the following conversation:

Joey: "You guys have developed this, like, cool, apprentice to yourself model, which is beautiful."

Ndindi: "Yeah. I love that word apprentice, which was something we really wanted to come back."

Joey: "That's like a decolonial experience in itself. You get to like, hone these skills. And it serves something real? You're not just like a cog in the machine of industrial labor."

Ndindi: "Yeah. And then, you know, one day, should we kind of escape industrial farming and these things, we really are going to need Ben to perfect his fishery skills. We're also really interested in the self-reliance, determination aspect of it. People feel it's necessary. It always amazes me like you learn how to use a loom and then you're like, 'I'm confident

I can do a thing'. And then you're like, 'I can do another thing'. So quite frankly, a lot of the crafting and how sometimes people find their way here is they're working out their fears of climate breakdown. And it's a real thing. People are really invested in: 'I need to figure out gardening not for gardens, but this could really be it'. And I wish adults would address that concern a little bit more. Because we hear it all the time from young people. They see how we treat each other. And they see how we treat the earth." (24)

It was evident to me here that the acquisition of hands-on skills, especially ones such as traditional means of production, were directly connected to decolonization and the seeking of practices that could allow us to refuse industrialization and replace it with more sustainable interactions with the natural world and use of natural material (Darder, 2015). At Hālau Kū Māna, hands-on work was embedded into the *aloha 'aina* curriculum and because students were given sustained practice with one craft or skill for an entire year, they were able to emerge with a substantial practical knowledge about that craft to carry them into future use and application of those skills. Kaleo described to me how the word-working skills he acquired at Hālau Kū Māna had not only shaped the professional direction he is now taking since graduation but were also a part of his contribution to his Hawaiian community.

Kaleo: "Coming to this school like I learned a lot of hands-on stuff. And then I realized why I wasn't doing good in class. And why I was doing good over here is because over here is hands-on learning. But that's what this school is about—this experiment. It was a really cool place to learn what my foundation was. From Trevor, I learned about trees and then actually got into woodwork. And then I graduated, now I'm going into carpentry. I wouldn't find this bit of a passion towards wood if it wasn't for Kumu Trevor. Now I'm a carpenter and I didn't realize till now that this school kind of directed

me into that path without even knowing that. It's just really awesome because when you getting to uka, what I learned for carpentry stuff, when I got to lo'i I learned how to combine carpentry with helping Hawaiian homes, and then that's another foundation for them and building houses for them. Yeah, it's just a whole nother level of seeing the bigger picture." (12)

I heard in Kaleo's story that the skills he acquired in wood working and learning how to grow *kalo* in the *lo'i* were directly related to his usefulness and his vision to serve the decolonizing and sustainable agendas of the Hawaiian Kingdom community. I reflect on how in mainstream schooling, not only is hands-on work relegated to arts and crafts or extra-curricular activities, but also the cultural and decolonizing potential is often completely missed. At these two communal schools, however, this practice directly seemed to lend itself to transformative experiences and skills for each student and also for their communities.

Towards Justice

The transformative power of community to bring about justice and change emerged as a central component to learning and was evident at both schools, core to the guiding visions of each one. Both Ndindi and Trevor had spoken to me about their *expectations* for students to emerge from their schools, having the conviction and tools of community activism. This was imparted through experiences of fighting for justice throughout a student's time at either Hālau Kū Māna or Angeles Workshop School. Makana shared with me how the education she and her peers received at Hālau Kū Māna helped them transform their anger about the injustices they live with into a sense of agency and responsibility:

Makana: “I feel like it's the education you get here. It turns from maybe you come in with a certain mindset like that, but then learn ‘Is that really the best way to go? What good to come and just be a mad person? Those people already took our land, so what do you get?’ That's like a big thing here. I know that teachers stress not learning only about what happened. Their thing is, ‘What are you going to do about it?’ That's a big thing that they stress here. ‘What are you going to do about it?’” (4)

Trevor had shared with me on many accounts about how Hālau Kū Māna was the strongest presence in political marches to Iolani palace or to city hall. Students, families and alumni collectively accessed the transformational power of social capital in fighting for justice, as Trevor explained:

Trevor: “They have more power than the board or the principal. Just because of social capital. It’s like taking command, the alumni, families, and students, when we go march.” (5)

Trevor had told me and Michael of just how seriously the school took their role in political activism and the target on their backs that they had acquired as a result:

Trevor: “Have you seen videos of Kū Māna marching? There are only two schools that get in the face of legislators regularly. Us, and this other school that they shut down. So now we're the number one target. There is nobody they'd rather get rid of than us.” (4)

For Hālau Kū Māna, it seemed to be a part of their radical lineage to embed such transformative activism into their curriculum and school identity. At Angeles Workshop School, radical action was also spoken of as central to their curriculum and school identity. Ndindi explained to me that though many families tended to seek them out for their progressive values, the school functioned to expand awareness and push the needle of radical action within its community

members:

Ndindi: “I would say our space tends to be more radical than what people are getting at home. Because although people seek us out for values—a big part of it is the no homework, the smaller school size, all of that is that is very attractive to parents. But then they get in here, and then they realize, oh, it's aspiring for more than that. And then sometimes they linger and don't commit, or they jump all the way in. And then that's when they really realize, ‘Oh, it's not so much you don't have homework, but it's, we don't have homework because we don't really are not super into coercing people into doing things. So let's figure out how we can get people to do things. If that's a core value, you're gonna see how you want to push back against all sorts of hierarchies everywhere.’” (23)

Ndindi explained how that “pushing back” that the school fostered had translated into the students’ everyday lives and relationships outside of school:

Ndindi: “Students push back in their online lives. They talk a lot about it, really: ‘We have all these friends like, we game together. But they treat each other in these ways.’ And then we also hear quite a lot about folks, relatives, or when they go to other environments, where it surprises them a little bit how people treat each other. So I think, if nothing else, there's expectations of ‘As a complete person, I should have agency.’ That seems to make a difference. To how their expectation of how to treat others or how people are treated. And usually, where people are pushing more, I think it happens at home. The evidence I have for that is I'll get texts and messages from parents who are like, ‘So we had a conversation about Afghanistan, or whatever, can you help whoever more?’ Or ‘I just don't know how to talk about race.’” (23)

Beyond fostering push back and conversations that expand consciousness in each student’s or family’s lives beyond the school, Ndindi also spoke to me about their explicit curriculum that expected students to move towards ideas of justice and activism.

Ndindi: "I think there is an expectation. And I think it's pretty overt. For our thematic lenses for Humanities, one of them is the subjectivity of history. So we want to focus on the people who actually do the stuff and not just the heroes and holidays so that everyone knows. Another one is 'Time isn't an endless endeavor but not progress for progress's sake'. We have science, thematic lenses, the nature of science. So science is different from other things. But there's implications in the real social world. That's always a through line. So everyone knows, it's not just talking about carbohydrates, it's talking about health. It's talking about how society views a healthy person. So that part of it is pretty overt. But there's no dogma, you don't need to leave here and be like, 'I am a narco communist. I am a libertarian who's going to live off the...' But I do think those values do not sit with like, right wing, or individualistic, those who are reactionary ones. So you can't just be contrary to be contrary type of thing. It's not so much what we are resisting or revolting against. It's also like, what do we want? So yes, there's a thing called medical racism. But we're not going to stop there, we're going to talk about what type of health systems could be one. And then what someone like Lucy might draw from that is women need more agency and these choices, giving birth at home is safe, we can involve more people. So that's one of the ways we can move from the lens and the actual curriculum, the stuff I have to teach you, the uterus and all of this stuff to like, the women's issues, and the actual problems with the medical racism to like, 'What is our vision of a kind of society?' So we hope that we can get to a point where people are able to project that and put it out constantly. So I think that's the revolutionary part of it." (23)

Ndindi spoke of radical curriculum as the catalyst for transformational action with each of the students and their corresponding families and communities. She did not shy away from the intentionality within the school to nurture folks who will answer the more problematic questions about social structures and social injustices and respond with real actions. To give

students the lenses and skills to consider, dialogue about, and organize to *do* something about the world around them appeared to be a transformative aspect of humanizing education within our *communal schools*.

I further conceptualize that a humanizing education, rooted in relationship, carried out by and for the community, is at the heart of *school as communion*. By first fostering belonging and creating safe spaces, then allowing time and practice for students to transform individually and collectively, through the acquisition of sustainable skills and a sense of agency and justice, our *communal schools* attended to the full humanity of their members. They illustrate that it is in becoming more human that we become better equipped to refuse colonization, to imagine authentic replacements for colonizing systems, and to remember a future of shared peace, beauty, and abundance.

Stabilizing & Sustainable

In various ways Ndindi and Trevor spoke to me about their experiences in their respective projects of schooling as they pertain to stability and sustainability. Thus, a finding emerged from the data to imply that with enough time and community effort, schools which embody this notion of *school as communion* will eventually bring about conditions of stability and sustainability for their communities. Though *communion* can be seen as a recursive, unfinished process without one singular end goal, this is not to say that this process is aimless and revolving around a static fixed point. Though iterative and ongoing, *communion* serves to bring those who engage in the process relationally and dialogically into a deeper level of

understanding and thus agreement with one another.

Thus, I think of this process of *communion*, which I analyze through a lens of sustainable systems thinking, as a process which leads to greater stability among the complex living systems which participate in it (Capra & Luisi, 2018). As such, I view *school as communion* as a process which brings about greater stability and sustainability for the people and lands that participate. For communities who struggle against the exploitation and destruction imposed on them by settler-colonialism, establishing schools as communion, as sites on which sustainability and stability can be achieved and maintained, this is a radical implication.

Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School demonstrated to me that to achieve this state of stability was to rely on the community to work together, each person understanding and taking responsibility for their own role in the collective whole. This was a process of dialogue and negotiating change and challenges together. Ndindi had experienced this trend towards stabilization over the seven years since Angeles Workshop School has been around. She shared with me:

Ndindi: “I’m comfortable in the sense that we have quite a few years under our belt and feel like, it’s a thing. Year one we wonder, ‘Are we a thing?’ But now, okay. Yes. I feel confident. People come here and they feel they’re getting what it is we said we’re gonna do— it is a thing.” (22)

Ndindi talked about this idea of creating spaces where others become so good at the work, that the ones that came before can “become obsolete”.

Ndindi: “I need to get out of the way. I want to be someone who’s always open to knowing

when I'm in the way, and I want to get out of the way. I want to become very obsolete. I want to find a way to be obsolete. Because that's sustainability. Just completely obsolete. 'Come in. You do your thing. Yeah, sure, we're relating, but you don't need me as much for any of that.' That to me would be, in a more perfect world, a little bit of what that would look like. It would be like, 'Okay, it turns out, we now need to learn about how to grow our own food'. And it wouldn't be time-bound, I would suggest some things and they would come in and be like, 'Okay, the next nine months, we're really going to do this every day from 9am to 11'. Everyone says, yes, we agree. We give good feedback, we move forward. And when I am no longer useful to you, move on to another teacher who can teach you and support whatever you need to do, and let me get out of the way. That would be super ideal to me" (24)

Trevor often mentioned to me about the stability that Hālau Kū Māna was able to more recently experience. In the early days, the school did not even have a dedicated campus and they had to rent space in a building from a family running a tourism business at a nearby trailhead and cultural center. The school survived waves of funding cuts, the prohibitive policies of No Child Left Behind, and various other attempts made by the state or board to undermine the school's vision and existence. The staying power of the community and staff has held it through such fluctuations. Trevor often credited the deep lineage of folks who have been at the school from inception to present day and the low turnover compared to many public schools, especially charter schools. When I visited, Trevor indicated that the school no longer feared as much that they would be shut down. Rather, the staff who had been around the longest, such as Trevor, put a critical lens to the tradeoff of radicality the school had made in exchange for stability. Trevor noted, to him it seemed that the more something became established, the less new and

radical it would exist to be.

Other aspects contributed to the sustainability and stabilizing of these *school as communion* projects, including the training and return of graduates to staff the school as the next generation, acting as a community to bring about transformation of policy and social structures towards the protection of the school and community, and divesting the community from relying on colonial structures of resources and economics (See Chapter 8-Class). As I reflected, I realized that for these schools to have been in sustained relationship with and service to their communities, they must have had staying power. Turnover and failure would only have drained the community and made them more wary to take this journey of trust and communion. Thus, the evidence that emerged from Hālau Kū Māna and Angles Workshop School was significant to the legitimacy and sustainability of their work.

Barriers & Limits

While the methodology of my study does not include evaluative analysis, and I am not looking to nor have I been appointed to a position of presenting criticisms of the schools in my study, through intimate conversations, Ndindi and Trevor shared with me several examples of limitations and stories of the challenges and barriers they and their school communities have faced. I have been selective in my process of including findings in this section, as some challenges and limitations may not be understood by someone with limited relationship and experience within these communities. As an outsider myself, I approach this conversation with much sensitivity. I include these stories in this chapter to present a more authentic picture of

the process of creating *schools as communion*, limitations and barriers a part of that reality.

At Hālau Kū Māna, Trevor shared with me that many of these limitations came in conjunction with the school existing within the state Department of Education as a public school. As such, they were subject to state policies and procedures, such as standardized testing, the requirement to have a state regulated board, and the expectation to follow state-standards curriculum. Furthermore, Hālau Kū Māna faced the barrier of limited funding as compared to mainstream public schools in the Department of Education. Hawaiian Charter schools have faced a history of inequitable funding from the state and constant funding cuts. Additional challenges they have faced or continue to face include the appointment of racist and oppositional administrators, teachers, and board members who have actively challenged the school community's autonomy to act in alignment to their vision and mission. Though Hālau Kū Māna had not faced as high turnover in staff as many other public schools, especially charter schools, that was a testament to the dedication and grit of the *kumu* who have devoted their lives to the mission and community of the school, often at a great sacrifice of material stability. Trevor commented to me about how the low pay and bureaucratic pressures of the job often made it difficult to impossible for staff to sustain a reasonable living, especially when tasked to provide for their own families.

The school displayed remarkable resourcefulness and tenacity despite being deprived of resources at the state level. Compared to other schools in the state system, Hawaiian charter schools are provided with fewer material resources. A teacher shortage and a lack of quality

teacher training is an additional barrier that the community strives to overcome. Trevor once told me, **“If I could add one thing for our entire kingdom to be more teachers.” (6)** This remark spoke to, yet again, to the importance of “human resources” as Trevor calls it, in the sustaining of the school and the overcoming of all other barriers and limitations imposed on their community. Ndindi also voiced a desire for more like-minded educators and those willing to serve in a unique setting and role to join their school:

Ndindi: “I would love to give more of the admin role to somebody who that's where their gifts lie, and, and someone who actually enjoys the details. Who can share a vision, but also want to be in doing value-add and grimy stuff. And I'm hoping we're able to find that kind of person. So, I think it's hard to find, but I think that would make a difference.” (22)

In addition to the difficulty in finding like-minded staff, Ndindi also shared with me some of the other barriers they faced, including: ever-inflating rent, the difficulty to find an appropriate space to expand into, and limited access for some students who they are intent on serving. On this last point Ndindi shared with me how some students chose the school for themselves, but their parents didn't buy in and didn't allow their students to leave a more dominant school structure:

Ndindi: “There are a lot of students, young people who come by who are a perfect fit. Whose families don't recognize that, and they are stuck elsewhere. That happens quite a bit. I have teenagers email me on a pretty regular basis. They looked it up and found it. And I'm like, ‘Okay, this is great. But you do know your minor? And I'm gonna email you all with your parents. Come in see us.’ And they do. But then the parent just doesn't get it. So that happens a couple times a year, actually. And after that, I'll still hear from them,

like they'll DM me or something. So I'm always a little heartbroken about that, someone who really wants to be here, but they can't because of that.” (22)

She continued to share with me another situation that prevents students from attending is simply the geographic pushout of folks in their city due to gentrification or other oppressive economic conditions:

Ndindi: “We've never turned anyone away because of money. But we've had quite a few students move because their families cannot afford to live in Los Angeles anymore. Their neighborhood straight up gets gentrified, and it's a ‘We are moving back with our grandparents in West Virginia’ type of thing. That kind of thing happens. And that happens to the type of students that I really care about, Black and Brown students. That happens quite a bit. “(22)

Finally, Ndindi spoke to me about the students within the Tongva and other Indigenous communities who are native to the land occupied by the city of Los Angeles, and how they, despite interest and seeking out Angeles Workshop School, were restricted from attending due to the rigidity of the United States voucher system designed to limit resources for Native students.

Ndindi: “And then there's a handful of Indigenous kids who are super interested. And I guess the way their charter system works with public schooling, they're not able to take those dollars. They're not able to leave their system. It seems to me that theirs is more rigid. Which is a little sad to me. So there's a great little community they do Friday, Saturday, Sunday school, the Tongva folks. And it's an Indigenous education. They do K-8. And they do it on the side. It's led by six women spiritualists. It's awesome. I don't even know how they found me actually. And then I was like, ‘Oh, I really am in here’. And then every once in a while I'll meet a student here and there. But they're stuck. And you can

see the situation is kind of sad, because their elders are like, ‘Well, if you came to a place like this, we wouldn’t have to use our Saturdays and Sundays. We would just bring it all in.’ Which is what I’d really originally thought because our afternoons are very flexible. We would do your program. For example, ‘You don’t care if the kids come to this school? Then, bring it in’. But that’s just outside of our control, regardless of how creative and how much we want to do it. It comes down to their voucher system and the restrictions.

(22)

Ndindi speaks to a specifically restrictive situation that many Native students face under the occupation of the US government. While in Hawaii, the establishment of the Hawaiian Charter School movement has largely worked in bringing quality public education to Hawaiian students, the issue of access was still part of the conversations I had with Trevor. On the hike⁵, Trevor shared with me that many of the present-day Hālau Kū Māna students are from middle-class Hawaiian families. This fact surprised me because I had remembered reading in Noelani Goodyear-Ka ōpua’s *The Seeds We Planted*, that the location Hālau Kū Māna resides on now was chosen in part because it was home to a working-class Hawaiian community. Trevor noted that while those early years did have many of those students, along with what we referred to as “Title I” students, that over the years, the population of the school has trended more towards middle-class families. When I asked why this could be, Trevor offered up some theories about the lack of buses and transportation from further communities, some of which include more working-class Hawaiian families such as on the West side of the island. (Hālau Kū Māna is in the

⁵ I share this story from my voice and memory, checked and affirmed by Trevor, since the conversation occurred during an unrecorded portion of our hike day.

Southeast area of O'ahu and to drive from the West side can take over an hour each way.)

Additionally, Trevor added, the reputation of the school as providing a rigorous education with Hawaiian foundations he felt may be more attractive for middle-class families looking for schooling options to help their children be successful.

Trevor explained that it has been an ongoing debate at their school about who their target audience is. While Trevor is frustrated that the school had become so middle-class and is concerned about access for all students, he admitted that it did make some things easier. I considered this along with the context of the struggle for legitimacy that Hālau Kū Māna has faced against the Department of Education since its inception. When considering the constant evaluations of student test scores and threats to further cut funding have been waged against the school for decades, I began to see the context for the middle-class target audience taken by the board. The reputation of the two-parent, middle-class families who seemed to comprise the majority of the current school population has brought a sense of security to the school who is ever fighting to sustain a radical Hawaiian education in an under-funded, over-scrutinized dynamic with the Department of Education. Trevor and I, as we discussed more radical and less state-dependent dreams of communal schooling, continued to reflect on what more could be done for all the students who still do not have a safe communal school that reflects their identities and communities as an accessible choice for education in walking distance from their homes.

Communal schools, especially in the context of an oppressive settler-state system, will

experience limitations and challenges as an ongoing part of their existence. However, the evidence paints a portrait that these *communal schools*, as living dynamic communities, are very much in honest dialogue with themselves about their limitations and the challenges which they face, and are able to innovatively, resourcefully, and collectively navigate their way through such experiences and continue to grow for the benefit of their communities.

Summary

In this chapter, the portraits and dialogue which emerged from my time at Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School have told a story about the existence of *school as communion*, schools situated in place and grown from the communities. They are formed through complex and meaningful relationships and hold at their center a version of education in which learning is communal, truly of and for the communities to which they belong, intergenerational, and spaces for cultural meaning-making. As such, these schools are contextual and personal to the people and places which make them, reflective of the lived experiences and strengths of its members and responsive to the needs of its community. Communal learning is further understood as a humanizing education in which the members of the community access belonging and safe spaces, have opportunities to develop transformative skills and collective agency towards justice. Though these projects of *school as communion* face limitations, risks, and challenges, the storied evidence suggests that these endeavors make their way towards stability and sustainability, as a necessary experience for authentic liberation of colonized and marginalized communities.

Chapter 8—A Radical Existence

Drawing on evidence presented in the last two chapters, and bringing together new data and discussions, in this chapter I will illustrate how these two schools tell a story of a radical existence. Defying mainstream conceptions of a charter school and a private school, I saw Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School reject colonial impositions to exist as embodied spaces of their communities in which radical, anti-colonial, land-centered education is carried out under leadership and foundership of folks whose identities contest white patriarchy with their Indigeneity, blackness, femaleness, queerness, class, and other intersectionalities (Grosfoguel, 2008). These schools manifested to me the radical imaginaries of their communities, powerfully redefining what many of us know and have experienced school to be and how it can be structured and sustained. The communities of these schools seemed to have established relationships with power which subvert dominant settler-colonial and capitalist structures of power and reminded me of sources of power and ways to be in communion power which center harmony, sustainability, and reciprocity rather than violence, destruction, and exploitation.

As such, I was able to conceptualize these schools, though existing in many unfinished ways, as examples of what it would take to exist beyond colonial power structures, a process that centers on humans experiencing and understanding ourselves as spiritual beings within a spiritual realm (Aluli-Meyer, 2008; Dei, 2002). In our historical context, to be spiritual in education, yet not colonizing or religious, is to exist radically (Aluli-Meyer, 2008; Dei, 2002).

The stories my co-storyers tell of this radical existence is grounded in an awareness of its unfinished nature, a journey which reminds us of the timeless and spiritual potential of our collective imagination and collective manifestation of better realities. Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School, and the stories that Trevor, Ndindi and their communities tell, are a testimony to the radical possibilities that exist within each place and each group of people, to commune with power in their own revolutionary ways and to manifest their own radical existences.

In the stories and discussions that I present in this chapter, I delve deeper into theoretical discussions and flesh out how the data shaped my conceptualization of *communal schools*. I write from an understanding that many radical existences do not have to be in competition with one another, as colonization would have us believe, but rather that by holding to the relationships with power demonstrated to us in Indigenous and collective epistemologies, and by striving to see how we each fit into the collective whole in communion with one another, we may begin to imagine a constellation of many thriving communities, all caring for one another and the earth in harmony and abundance. This is a radical story.

Resisting Historically Oppressive Systems– Rejecting Colonial Impositions

Colonization has historically been first and foremost an act of ongoing violence and atrocities against Indigenous peoples, through the stealing, occupation, and destruction of their land and murder, removal, and erasure of their people. Subsequent acts of violence within the imperial, colonial agenda included the violent capture and enslavement of Indigenous

African peoples, creating a group of people connected through the historical atrocities done to their ancestors in the production of chattel slave (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Ongoing forms of oppression and imposition within settler-colonial structures continue to destroy land and communities and dehumanize people of the Global South through various forms of systematic oppression including racism, classism, sexism, patriarchy, land occupation, and decimation of natural resources. Indigenous and anti-colonial communities and movements have continuously resisted such systems of oppression and fought for increased visibility and momentum in the face of a globally established colonial institution. School, then, is a particular site of resistance (Illich, 2000; hooks, 2003). I observed the schools of my study to have existed in the ways that they did by and through resisting colonial systems on many levels. In this section, I present some facets of their radical resistance.

Indigeneity

Hālau Kū Māna as a Native Hawaiian school and Angeles Workshop School founded by an Indigenous Kamba woman, which both centered on a form of education tied to Indigenous epistemologies, illustrated radical exceptions to the colonial exclusions of Indigeneity in places and positions of power, including in academics. Hālau Kū Māna had a pivotal history in the Hawaiian charter school movement; the founders of the school fought hard in the 90's to obtain the right to begin publicly funded Hawaiian schools in which Hawaiian culture, history, language, and knowledge could be preserved and transmitted to the Hawaiian communities.

Ndindi, in her identity as an Indigenous Kamba woman, also defies colonial impositions

as a founder of an independent, urban school. Though Angeles Workshop School was not an explicitly Indigenous school, it served as a particular example in what school, grounded in Indigenous knowledges and principles and which seeks to be in harmony and reciprocity with the Indigenous peoples of that place, can look like within a diverse, even urban, place. This example is crucial for us as we consider the broader scope of educational needs and the conditions in which a majority of places have been impacted by colonial globalization; many factors of push out, including but not limited to war, genocide, climate migration, and the creation of poverty by capitalism, have created diverse communities of many folks struggling to make home in new places.

Both Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop school illustrated to me the radical possibilities to create authentically reimagined schools by and for Indigenous communities and to for diverse communities who seek to challenge the settler-colonial state through foregrounding Indigenous knowledge and principals and establishing reciprocity with the people and land in which they inhabit.

Race

Racism as one of the most violent and visible forms of colonial oppression has extreme effects within the history of schools (Hundle, 2019; Love, 2019, McLaren, 2015). School is often a place where racism is enacted, overtly and covertly, and much academic literature has been devoted to documenting these effects and calling for anti-racist action. Racism takes on many forms as it affects different racialized groups differently (Monzó, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012). For

example, racism for many Indigenous groups in the United States has involved, among other atrocities, removal of Indigenous people from their lands by genocide and forced migration, erasure of the Indigenous identity from dominant discourse, attempts to destroy Indigenous language and knowledges, and to mythicize and romanticize Indigenous stories and histories as fiction rather than truth. Racism against Black peoples in the United States has included such acts of violence as slavery, lynching, dehumanization, economic and other forms of suppression, and the creation of false narrative within dominant discourse of Black people in dehumanized ways to create a target for their unjust killing and mass incarcerations, among other forms of systematic injustice.

Ndindi as a Black, Indigenous, formerly undocumented, ESL speaker, queer, trans-national woman with her story of being not only a math and science educator but a founder of her own school in a former sundown town is a truly radical testimony of resisting colonial impositions. Along with her fellow black, female math teacher-colleague, Tiffany, they are changing the racial narrative of who can be a teacher and school founder, opening doors of further equality for their students and families.

In one conversation, Ndindi, speaking of the place in which they had chosen to create their school, told me of the darker history of Palms, California: **“So it's white middle class, actually. It was a sundown town actually, until like, sheesh...I want to say the mid-eighties.”** (20)

I hear an activation in Ndindi's voice as she blurted out the next sentence: **“I could not have been born there until the 80s!”** (20), with this simple declaration claiming herself as a

revolutionary subject within the story of race and racism specific to this place.

The fact that Ndindi, along with Tiffany, were able to exist presently in such powerful roles as radical educators in this community which is home to many black families, created a narrative of liberation and possibility for the students who found them here. Ndindi shared:

Ndindi: “Tiffany is a Black woman who's our math teacher. Ndindi is a Black woman who's our science teacher. I have had people just show up on that alone. We have two students who are admitted. They're two younger students coming next year. And they're both black girls. That was it. They were like, 'I need to see this.' They saw the website. They were like, 'This is different from what we're getting; this seems important to us. What is this? We want to participate.'” (23)

As Ndindi narrated this story to me, I heard joy and power in her voice, and I recalled the historical significance in which she situated herself and the lives of her students.

School, under settler-colonial society, has served a racist agenda (Illich, 2000; McLaren, 2015). Anti-racist movements in education have always been at the forefront of resistance; yet progress within dominant institutions has been hard-fought for and is under constant threat (Meyerhoff & Thompsett, 2017). I know from first-hand experience that even establishing ethnic studies classes in public school, much less as a requirement for graduation, is still a bitter battle in 2022. Students of color are not safe in dominant institutions, subject to the push-out and school-to-prison pipeline type policies heavily waged on students of color, it is well-known in critical scholarship that school is not a place of opportunity and education for all our children. Rather, it is a place of harm (Love, 2019). The *communal schools* of this study,

existing as places of learning for and by folks of color and providing the education and opportunity that often eludes their children in settler-state institutions, portrayed a radical counter-narrative and resistance to the colonial-oppressive versions of school which have existed for too long as the only choice for many communities.

Gender & Sexuality

Under colonial patriarchy, any identity that is not hetero-cis-male is marginalized, oppressed, and suppressed (Kumashiro, 2000). Furthermore, for folks of trans and non-binary identities, their experiences and identities are often dismissed altogether, while violence and other injustices against their bodies continues to be pervasive. These forms of oppression are ever-present and produced within dominant school systems. For schools such as Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School to exist as safe spaces for all genders and sexualities and to be created by and uphold leadership of folks who are queer, non-binary, and female is a radical speaking back to dominant discourse about who is allowed to exist and thrive in such spaces.

While gender and sexuality are two distinct intersections of identities and experiences, for the scope of this chapter, I have included them together in this section, as I recall Trevor's stories from the last chapter in which he illustrates Hālau Kū Māna as a place of belonging for many *mahu* folks, both students and teachers (See Chapter 7-Safe Space). I think of Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, one of the founders of Hālau Kū Māna and a respected leader in the modern-day Hawaiian movement, walking alongside and on the shoulders of other prominent *mana wahine* in the movement, such as sisters Haunani-Kay Trask and Mililani Trask. I also call

in the example of Ndindi who exists as both female and queer and serves as powerful example of school foundership and leadership in a place in which she would physically have not been allowed to exist just decades ago. Even today, her work and presence continue to defy the dominant colonial narrative.

I think about the power of female and non-binary leadership as not by chance, but rather as an expression of their power in being female and non-binary, identities, I would argue, which lend to their value in such roles. I recall Trevor speaking to me of the historical and present-day evidence of this in the Hawaiian movement, led by *mana wahine*:

Trevor: “In student leadership, it’s just all girls and we see it here in this high school too. Like I said, most of the alphas are *mana wahine*. Our whole movement, the whole Hawaiian movement is *mana wahine*. There’s very few kane– their male privilege still elevates them above *mana wahine*, and I think that their story will get told more than the *mana wahine* in some sense–but in terms of just sheer numbers, almost everybody I’ve mentioned to you is *mana wahine*.” (13)

Trevor’s story grounds in me an anti-colonial reality that still feels foreign to me, as a woman who has existed in most ways under patriarchy for my whole life. Though I am also descended from cultures of strength for women in both my Hakka and Irish ancestry, this story gave opportunity to recognize just how refreshing it was for me to hear tell of *mana wahine*, powerful women in leadership. Yet, even here in Trevor’s dialogue with me, I still saw the grips of patriarchy which continue to elevate male stories above those of women, and recognize that even within many radical communities, there is still much work to be done to further the

decolonization and dismantling work.

In recognition of the work still at hand in undoing colonial structures of patriarchy and white privilege, I feel a sense of urgency for stories such as Ndindi's and those of the *mana wahine* and queer and *mahu* folks, to be told and elevated in many spaces in education, bringing forward further testimonies which help us resist and inspire us to further dismantle colonial patriarchy.

Socio-Economic Class

Under settler-colonization, the hoarding of resources by the upper class and the suppression of opportunity for the lower classes to create economic and resource-based stability has long been a factor in maintaining the colonial agenda (Monzó, 2021). Well-documented in academic literature, schools have long served this agenda by replicating such class structures (Illich, 2000; McLaren, 2015). Public schools in marginalized communities are grossly under-funded and under-resourced (Love, 2019). This is an intentional tactic of settler-colonial institutions to suppress the upward movement of lower-class folks on the economic ladder of capitalism, effectively replicating a continual working class as replacement of chattel slavery to fuel capitalist wealth (Monzó, 2019). For Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School to overcome the economic barriers they face from settler-colonial bureaucratic institutions and to intentionally serve working class families, along with families of other classes, is for them to radically resist colonial impositions of class and to push the boundaries of our existence under capitalism towards a space of liberation for their communities.

Ndindi and Scott have created something so necessary in having a private tuition-based school, in which class is discussed, contributions are transparent, and resources are regarded as collective. While sliding-scale organizations are not novel, the authenticity and transparency to translate into collective consciousness and shared responsibility within the Angeles Workshop example is a testament to Ndindi and Scott's radical trust in the relationships and care within their community.

Ndindi: "We try our hardest to work with students and help them recognize like, 'Hey, you're completely 100% a student here'. We had a student who paid us in tips, an undocumented family. And they really wanted to be here. Mom was a revolutionary in Mexico. And she really was into Zapatismo. And she was like, 'My kids cannot go to a dominant school'. We were like, 'Okay, just come pay what you can'. And they never failed. They paid with tips, and they would pay \$200 a month. And they would not say no. That was a huge insult to them to not accept. And the way we kind of worked it with students is also part of the reason we're kind of not into pop culture as much, or I have the latest this or that. Yeah. If you notice, we're not having conversations about what people have. Or why that makes you better, smarter, cooler. So that seemed to make a difference." (20)

Critics of communism do not often recognize the time and work needed to create cultures of relationship and humanity above materiality and individualism. Ndindi and Scott and their Angeles Workshop community show us that even in an urban location such as Los Angeles, there are real folks who are working every day in sustained ways to try to exist beyond capitalism, including in a school which has continued to exist for 7 years and is still going strong.

Land

Creating systems of land ownership has been another specific tactic of settler-colonialism with its capitalist systems (Patel, 2016). This tactic has a deep history against Indigenous communities, Black communities, and other colonized communities. Schools, existing on land, are implicated in this argument (Patel, 2016). Oftentimes, schools of dominant systems are built and developed on land with no regard for the natural ecosystem or the Indigenous communities who call that land home. Furthermore, many schools take up acres of habitable land yet remain chained and locked during after-school hours, serving no purpose for their communities. Paved with concrete and depleted of green spaces, producing excess waste, and emitting greenhouse gasses, many schools of settler-colonial institutions contribute to climate fragility and land injustice. For Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School to exist in land in relationships of reciprocity and stewardship is another aspect of their radical resistance to colonial oppression.

In both Chapters 6 and 7, I shared the story of Hālau Kū Māna serving a reciprocal purpose with the land on which it resides. Prior to the school coming to this piece of land in Makiki valley, the valley had been a site of environmental catastrophe. As a byproduct of colonial occupation, the destabilization of Native relations with land and the subsequent creation of poverty (especially within Hawaiian communities pushed into urban or rural spaces), Makiki valley had become a trash heap. The verdant, healthy valley became buried under meters of rubbish, polluting their stream and *lo'i*, making it impossible to grow their

sacred food staple *kalo*. Prior to erecting the school buildings for Hālau Kū Māna, the community came together to level the trash heap and pour dirt on top of it, not having enough funding or means to remove the decades of rubbish.

In the 15 years that the school has been on this land, it has served as a site of resistance against further colonial development. The state bureau is constantly applying pressure to try to push out the school from this location, so that they may pave it over into a parking lot, funneling more tourists into the valley as a new hike destination for the hordes of people who come to Waikiki each year, an act that would be devastating on the natural biomes of the valley and surrounding regions. The tenuousness of Hālau Kū Māna's situation is always felt under the surface, as they are on a limited lease with the department of state parks. But one thing I gathered in my time at Hālau Kū Māna that feels unshakeable is their conviction for their existence. They believe in their collective power to march, to resist, to refuse, and to take up space that is rightfully theirs. With 15 graduating classes of powerful Hawaiian *kanaka* activated and equipped to collectively serve the Hawaiian kingdom, I am more than hopeful in the transformative power of the seeds this school has sown and the realities of justice, even land justice, which will be actuated by their collective movement.

Reimagining What Has Not Worked for Us—Dismantling & Building

I believe one of the reasons that school has been particularly effective as a tool for ongoing colonization is because it has effectively disconnected communities all over the world from their memory of what education and school was in the past, thus extinguishing the

momentum for collective imagining of what school and education could be in our futures. This has occurred through the systematic and global institutionalizing of school as a generally monolithic conception, formatted to produce global labor along class systems, perpetuating the capitalist, colonial agenda. Every part of school, then, from curriculum to organization, use of land and resources to assessment of achievement, serves a purpose in the capitalist colonial agenda. The pervasiveness of colonization is buttressed by how it affects human memory and imagination. For a community to reimagine, that is to remember and to imagine ways of being beyond colonial impositions, is a truly radical act and the evidence in this study illustrates the power of such collective manifestations. In this section, I will bring together stories of this radical reimagining, communities dismantling that which does not serve them and building and growing in its place authentic and sustainable realities and futures in which they may grow and thrive.

Reimagining School Structure

Much of the discourse on education reform or innovative school models has involved a debate around the validity of charter schools or public schools. While many of the arguments presented in those debates (accessibility, accountability, etc.) are worthy of conversation, in this study, the data contributes to that conversation differently. Hālau Kū Māna as a public charter school and Angeles Workshop School as an urban private school tell stories of the radical *possibilities* to serve communities equitably and transformatively. Serving agendas that are authentic to their communities rather than to some sense of identity as a charter school or

private school, these two schools superseded the limitations placed on them as a charter and private school and created identities for themselves as *communal schools*.

Much of the academic discourse on the validity of charter schools is a highly polarized conversation; critics arguing that the charter system tend toward corporate benefit and drain public resources, supporters arguing that school choice and having freedom under charters for communities to innovate for themselves is a necessary means to resist the racist and classist under-resourcing of vulnerable communities (Monzó, 2021). The argument against school choice is often voiced loudest by progressive educators and scholars who insist that public schools, as a communal free resource, only work if the entire community supports and patronizes it. School choice is often fought for by conservative or upper-class folks who have the means to send their children to high-tuition private schools, without consideration that the removal of their funds and presence in public institutions then funnels resources away from the communities and schools which need it the most.

In my experience and research, both arguments hold weight; and the polarization of this conversation on school choice has done little to serve the communities who need better schools the most. Admittedly, my study seems to support a school choice position, if we were to simplify in broad terms. The schools of this study represent alternatives to existing public schools, and thus represent a *choice* other than the local public school for families to enroll their students in. The trained educators who are now teachers and founders of these schools are not using their skills and experience within the public schools which are most deprived of devoted

anti-racist and anti-colonial educators. This contradiction is one that Trevor, Ndindi, and I (along with our educational communities) sit with seriously and grapple with collectively. Yet at the core of that tension, we have landed on an agreement (for me, through the process of this study, for Ndindi and Trevor, through their journeys with their schools): these *communal schools* are necessary. The contradictions must be worked out, yet we cannot ignore the value and benefit the *communal schools* of our study and many others have added to their communities.

When we consider the debate about school choice and some of the other examples of charter schools and private schools with their more problematic aspects, which have existed previously in dominant consciousness, we can see some clear distinctions that the *communal schools* of this study make in contrast to the other versions of school alternatives. I have already discussed the ways in which Hālau Kū Māna and the other Hawaiian charter schools have existed differently from the more dominant discourse on charter schools (See Chapter 8-Indigeneity). In many ways Hālau Kū Māna and its staff and students are also in community with other schools including charter, private Hawaiian schools, and even public schools. Trevor's student government organization Ke Ea, as one example, serves students from various schools with a common purpose of training Hawaiian youth to advocate for their communities in the legislature.

Ndindi with Angles Workshop School conceptualizes education as a spectrum, with many different versions and types of schools serving distinct purposes and populations, not in competition with one another, but in communion and harmony. Ndindi stated to me a

fundamental belief they hold about their existence as a school alternative:

Ndindi: “That was one of our foundational things– public school systems still serve almost everyone. So we can't be people who extract from it, or demand things from it for our own purposes, so that we can have a boutique or utopia.” (24)

Practically, Ndindi, in her stories and the actions I observed, embodied non-competitive, and thus anti-colonial, relations within the larger school network. Ndindi narrated that she has often referred families to other schools she felt may have been a better fit for their child than Angeles Workshop School, whether because other schools may offer programs such as sports or activities that Angeles isn't able to provide, or because the student may thrive in a larger social environment than what Ndindi has called the 20ish student “micro-school” model at Angeles. She also tried to establish reciprocity with their local public school as much as possible, though she admitted, there were limitations that challenged that:

Ndindi: “We're like, ‘Hey, this is open, y'all come here and we will all do that.’ But I think there's a way in which public school is structured that makes it difficult for relationships to happen. It's very transactional. But one of our students here, even though they live in this city, can't just easily walk over to the high school, make friends and do their little thing, even though I would like to have more open access. Like, if they let you come at 11am and you want to fly kites with us, I'll make it happen for you. But they don't have a good way of doing that, so we haven't been able to really do reciprocity. And I think I was naive about that at the beginning. Or at least I told myself, I'm not really leaving the public system.”

I could hear that one of the contradictions that Ndindi struggled with in not being able to have mutual open access for students of the local high school and students and Angeles Workshop lay

in her no longer serving as a local public school teacher. I began to imagine a reality in which these reciprocal relationships among schools in the same community were able to materialize, and the beauty of Ndindi's vision overcame all my past notions of schooling. While Ndindi admitted that her concept felt utopian given the real and material limitations we live with in a settler-state, I could not help but wonder how far off we may be in actualizing a network of various schools for the community, some of which may continue to look like larger public schools that are best able to provide access and larger organized activities, others smaller communal schools with specific focuses, all in reciprocal relationship with one another rather than in competition. I wondered what it would take to get us there. I wondered if there would be buy in. These are questions this study has now directed me to ask, realizing firmly that present-day conceptions of school in competition with one another are not serving us. We have a responsibility to do as the folks of Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School are doing: reimagine school structures into versions that better serve our communities.

Reimagining Curriculum & Teaching Practices

Curriculum and teaching methodologies are other long-contested topics in education, mostly designed to serve a colonial agenda, while more progressive curriculum and methodologies face constant backlash and subsequent suppression within dominant school systems (McLaren, 2015). As small schools co-constructed by and for their communities, in many ways the curriculum and teaching methodologies at Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School were shown to exist differently than in dominant schools. Whereas Angeles

Workshop School told a story of radical autonomy when it comes to curriculum and teaching methods, Hālau Kū Māna told a story of navigating bureaucratic pressures and limitations with regards to curriculum and methods, to still create an authentic learning experience and level of autonomy that serves their community. Both stories, though different, illustrated to me the necessity and radical possibility of allowing communities to construct and determine the curriculum and teaching practices that best serve them, while navigating the skills and knowledge needed to participate in a greater collective existence.

At Hālau Kū Māna, curriculum was an area that most clearly exemplified to me the ongoing struggle of resistance and an unfinished work of reimagining (through remembering) anti-colonial teaching practices. Although the school is explicitly a Hawaiian school, and Hawaiian culture and ideologies are evident throughout the school, Trevor spoke to me in many conversations about the grasp that dominant curriculum still has over the teaching that occurs at the school. As a charter school subject to the state department of education, teachers felt the pressure to include state standards within their lessons and to ensure that their students achieve passable test scores each year, ensuring funding of the school in subsequent years. Additionally, Trevor noted to me that most teachers have gone through dominant teacher preparation programs, thus, their teaching methods have been largely instilled to replicate dominant curriculum. Yet, despite these factors, many teachers have found a way to bring Hawaiian education within the parameters and pressures that they experience. Trevor gave the example of one of his mentors at the school:

Trevor: “She teaches US history. So, she's been teaching for, I don't know, 30 years. And super loyal to the Queen and kingdom. And is an inspiration for all of us in terms of what does Hawaiian education look like? But her curriculum is textbook US history. Just straight out of the US history book.” (5)

Although this teacher taught from the dominant textbook, she embodied the knowledge and culture of being Native Hawaiian in a way that staff and students all valued. She taught as a family member who loved all those who come into her class. Trevor spoke of her as a storehouse of Hawaiian crafting knowledge, teaching her *aloha ‘aina* class from years of lived experience. For Trevor, relationships and engaging students are central to Hawaiian teaching, beyond what is given the pages of a textbook or worksheet. After observing Trevor teach a high school math class, he reflected back to me that he had realized that having a math class which includes “Hawaiian” elements like coconuts or hula in the problems wouldn’t make it a Hawaiian class, **“And in fact, it's kind of racist” (12)**, Trevor mentioned. Rather, for him Hawaiian education centered on relationships and knowing one another. He pointed out that two of his students in the class were enthusiastic about cars and hoped to be mechanics after high school. Trevor had made the day’s math problem about cars, knowing it would ignite the interests of those students: **“So they want to talk about systems, we're not going to talk about systems of color, we're going to talk about systems of carburetors” (12)**. Trevor’s point was that simply *knowing* his students was more a value of Hawaiian ideology than any use of Hawaiiana motifs on a textbook could ever be.

Another way that Trevor indicated to me that relationship is centered in teaching

practices at Hālau Kū Māna was that all teachers had a partner teacher in their classes. Trevor described the dynamics between him and his partner teacher as: he focused on curriculum and lessons, and she focused on social-emotional support and helping students through their work. This dynamic reminded me of the teacher-partnerships I had experienced in special education classes in dominant public schools, though many of those relationships that I had witnessed were distant and professional at best. Teaching partners at Hālau Kū Māna stayed together for many years, and many developed a deep rapport, Trevor told me. Trevor and his partner teacher, Kumu Kalei, were great friends and modeled that relationality to the students in their classroom.

At Angeles Workshop School as an independent school, not having the restrictions of state testing or standards placed on them, I witnessed truly radical versions of teaching and curriculum. In Chapter 7, I discussed some of the radical lenses embedded in their curriculum (See Transformative-Towards Justice). Angeles Workshop School illustrated a reimagined model of co-constructed, radical teaching and curriculum, grounded in place, aligned with Indigenous ideologies, and practicing democracy and non-coercion. One of the practices of teaching that really stood out to me at the school was how they balanced a notion of rigor and skills based on actual social need, while making space for evaluations such as grades to be still co-constructed and free from shame. Ndindi explained this to me:

Ndindi: “I’m also very honest about people’s academics. So I keep giving the example of math. Like, it’s completely okay with us, if it’s gonna take you however long it takes you

to do whatever, but we're always very clear on the skills people have and don't have. And I think that's allowed us to suggest things that are within people's reach. And then if they're not like, 'Okay, you really would like to go to UCLA to do engineering, we're going to need to do X, Y, and Z'. And also be honest, like, 'A lot of this jumping of hoops has nothing to do with you as an individual, probably has nothing even to do with the academic subject. You're going to need to figure out how to work this system, if that's where you want to be.' And we want people to feel very honest and good about their capabilities.” (20)

A particular quality I found important to enacting this reimagined education, was that of being unhurried, allowing much time for moments to unfold and lessons to transpire as needed. I witnessed this quality in both our *communal schools* in many ways from the lack of school bells in favor of organic organization of time and trust in the community to follow a mutually agreed upon schedule, to the grace given, reflective of each student's ability and learning needs, for completing tasks and meeting deadlines. This sense of *unhurriedness* permeated relationship-building, organizing, exploration, and communication. In many ways this quality was born out of an Indigenous and anti-colonial sense of time wherein productivity and effectiveness are not valued over natural rhythms and organic experiences of living communities.

The degree of autonomy to practice different curriculum and teaching methods was different between our two communal schools, due to the school structure of each, however, both still demonstrated reimagined practices and curriculum that better served their own communities. As we consider the different avenues to achieving *school as communion*, and the limits that come with each, we must consider how to best reimagine curriculum and teaching

practices in these spaces, as this is a crucial aspect to resisting colonizing structures (McLaren, 2015).

Reimagining Resources

Access to material resources is a very real barrier that oppressed communities face, and this affects many levels of radical community work. From human resources to natural resources to resources in the present capitalist system, the need to overcome material and human deprivation and to sustain our communities beyond capitalism and settler-colonial structures is an ongoing struggle (Monzó, 2019). However, Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School and their incredibly resourceful and innovative folks who comprise them told a radical story of reimagining and restructuring resources.

Though Hālau Kū Māna is publicly funded, as a Hawaiian charter school, they have always received a fraction of what dominant system public schools receive. Thus, being resourceful has been a necessary theme of their entire existence. From Noelani's stories in *Seeds We Planted* (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2013) to Trevor's stories he spoke to me while I was with him on the school campus, I gathered that levying the "human resources" of their community has always been a way for Hālau Kū Māna to navigate economic lack. When the school was being established on their current plot of land in Makiki Valley, the community came together to labor on the construction themselves. Trevor told the story:

Trevor: "So when it came to this site, we just had these two (portable classrooms) and office which got replaced. This was just bushes and nasty trees like this. We had to

chainsaw the trees down and stump-grind them and Uncles and Aunties came in and steamrolled and bulldozed.” (4)

Trevor, as the resident horticulturist, saw an opportunity in those early days of building to plant the food trees and garden around the perimeter of the plot, foreseeing the eventual expansion of classrooms on campus:

Trevor: “I kind of saw it coming. So I put quick trees on the edges so they wouldn't get knocked down when that campus came. That garden was here before all the buildings, all the trees were here before the buildings, the buildings here are the newest things you see.” (4)

The garden and trees added so much to the campus, an educational opportunity for students learning to tend to the plants and trees and a yearly harvest for the community. According to Trevor, though the harvest was not large enough to sustain the entire community, they served a purpose in the cultivation of skills which allowed each student and family the opportunity to carry out such sustainable practices on their own. Trevor has shared with me that several of his students have gone on to cultivate *lo'i*. *Kalo* as the key staple of a traditional Hawaiian diet is always in demand and low in supply. Many of the discussions I had with Trevor about accessing the potential of land involved talking about creating more *lo'i* to grow *kalo*.

Trevor shared with me that as he planned his move to acres of land on the Big Island, he was always thinking about ways to restructure resources and access what the land has to give to the community. He explained me and Michael at the end of our hike:

Trevor: “I'm trying to figure out how to turn that capital into community resource, you know? One way that you pull equity out of your 'aina is by growing food, right? So we're

gonna grow food. There are other ways that you can pull equity out of the land, because if we got 20 acres or 13 acres, if the economy was a different type of economy, 13 acres should be able to sustain a lot of things. If we could trade little plots on those 13 acres with others, like, 'Okay, this family is gonna run this, and this family is gonna do this. And in exchange, they're gonna provide this like, you know, they're gonna teach Fridays, or they're gonna, you know, always provide bananas', then I think you can pull different kinds of equity out of the land instead of reverse mortgaging it." (9)

Trevor's dream about the land sustaining him and his community and the *communal school* they hope to grow on that land evoked in me an image of the prosperous communal living that Hawaiians enjoyed before colonial invasion. Under capital colonialism, talks about such communal living are often dismissed as utopian, unable to be scaled, and prone to similar failures that other communist projects have seen throughout history. But here on Hawaiian land which remembers a reality of the not-so-distant past in which eight islands sustained a population of millions in a communal social structure, Trevor's dream seems rooted in the truths that capitalism has fought to bury with its genocides against Indigenous people and knowledges.

If we all were to remember how abundant our futures could be, sharing the land and caring for each other collectively, I wonder how much longer the settler-state could win the war over our minds. Schools such as Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop have created years of graduates who, like Kaleo and Makana, are seeking to use their skills for their communities instead of for mere personal gain. Who like Ben and other students at Angeles Workshop Project, are honing skills in response to climate anxiety, preparing for the end of

industrialization– something their generation actually *hopes* for? Who like Lucy, is striving to advocate for medical injustice and natural healing and birthing practices as a way to divest from the corporatized medical systems responsible for so many deaths of Black, Indigenous, and racialized-colonized folks?

Ndindi and Scott and their ingenuity with restructuring resources were portrayed in many ways in the stories I have shared throughout these findings (See Chapter 6-Belonging and Chapter 7-Class). When Trevor and Ndindi and I were able to have a conversation all together, the sharing of ideas around restructuring resources was a topic that we all found exciting to discuss. Some of what we discussed in various conversations about resources isn't sanctioned to be shared within the scope of this paper. Yet, we recognize that much of the possibility for *communal schools* to become an expanded reality in many communities resides within the willingness and aptitude of each community to discover how they may restructure their resources. The cultivation of this willingness and aptitude, I believe, can only be fortified through the building of relationships, laterally within one's many levels of community, and horizontally, learning and receiving from those who have gone before, who have tapped on your shoulder to invite you in, and who have a responsibility to see you through your journey.

Defying settler-colonial impositions with regards to economics and resources is arguably the most radical action that we can take in our efforts to restructure our communities, pushing for existence *beyond* colonial-capitalism and the settler-state. The evidence I have gathered in this study bolsters me to claim that through education in our *communal schools*, as

we expand this consciousness and practice collectively, it is altogether possible to amplify this communal power and truly render colonialism obsolete.

Centering Power—Existing Beyond Colonial Conceptions & Structures of Power

As anti-colonial educators and scholars, we often find ourselves in settings and conversations within academia and institutions of information and policy in which conversations on *power* seem to be most frequently centered on notions of *privilege* and its inverse disadvantages. While this conversation is critical and weighty especially as we organize ourselves around historical and present-day conditions of oppression towards the decolonization and liberation of our communities, I was offered many reminders in my time with Ndindi and Trevor that *power* does not always need to be considered or spoken of merely in terms which limit its meaning to dynamics of coloniality (Dei, 2016). Rather, in addition to conversations about power as privilege or the reclaiming of rights *from* oppressive systems, we can also remember and center our experiences of power as it exists timelessly *beyond* colonial conceptions and structures. To do so is a spiritual exercise yet grounded in the human and natural realm. To do so is to access a great collective potential to manifest power in radically authentic ways; in ways, I believe, that can contribute to the rendering of coloniality as obsolete. In this section, drawing from the stories gathered from Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School, and writing from a place of intuited knowledge inspired by folks such as Aluli-Meyer (2008), I illustrate concepts of power as communion, power as spirit, and power in place, identity, and Indigeneity. In doing so, I analyze the implications of such stories to suggest the

radical possibilities of communal schools to exist beyond colonial structures of power for the benefit of their communities and our collective earthly existence.

Power in Place, Identity, & Indigeneity

In reframing our ideas around power in place, identity, and Indigeneity in this section, I do not aim to minimize the very real histories and present-day struggles of Indigenous and colonized people. I must acknowledge the ongoing occupation and desecration of their lands by colonial settler-states and its attempts at erasing their culture and existences through such things as genocide, removal, Indian boarding schools, and other atrocious tactics. However, through Trevor and Ndindi's stories, I hope to illuminate a very real power I observed and heard of over much time, a power that is arresting, authoritative, and steady. To understand this power, I listened carefully and watched intently as my co-storyers spoke many testimonies and worked in various ways. I hope that in the sharing of their stories those of us who are not Indigenous can begin to understand more humbly the necessity of listening and learning from those who have come before, always asking ourselves: *Who was here first and what do they know that I do not know? How can I be still enough, quiet enough to find out?*

I will begin these stories with Ndindi sharing how she experiences power in her identity and the knowledge of her place in conversation with me that truly illustrates to me the power in identity, Indigeneity, and place:

Ndindi: "Oppressed people, we will figure it out. You know, I might despair for myself a little bit. But I am like, 'No, I come from strong, resilient people. We are here. We've

always been here. We hopefully will continue to be here. And we're always stable, we're peaceful. We are going to project things we want to see in the world. And we're going to push aside the stuff we don't. That's that."

Joey: "And just remembering that the conversation I had with you last week, you were saying like, 'We're from this place that's exactly the same as it's always been'. Like you talked about 'stable', you have a whole nother lived definition of 'stable' that most people don't have."

Ndindi: "Yeah, I'm very blessed in that way. I know exactly who I am. There's nothing you can do, even if you actually stole my body. Like if I were no longer in this plane, I know exactly who I am."

Joey: "That's peace. That's freedom."

Ndindi: "It's absolute freedom. I'm surprised how much nonsense I don't participate in. And then I come to realize, 'Oh, all sorts of people are out here doing all sorts of things that don't serve them. And like, maybe if you find some quiet, maybe if you return to the source, if you kind of do that kind of work, you might be able to release a lot of the noise, and then get involved in the things that you think will build what we want'. Yeah, I don't know. I don't want to have a world just kind of based in resistance. It's always resistance." (23)

As Ndindi spoke, the steadiness of her conviction was carried in her voice, her posture. In another conversation, Ndindi named this quality of steadiness, nothing able to shake her core:

Ndindi: "I think like Black women, folks of color, you know, LGBTQ folks, like, the offenses are just, it's whatever, it's like air. Nothing about my core shakes, because a white

person has feelings. So just, you know, we need to move past your feelings, and hopefully you can agree to move along, or if not, we can't put energy there. (23)

Despite the very real oppressions that are ongoing against people of color (and many other identities) under white patriarchy, this power that Ndindi expresses in her identity is real and collective. (I am sure I would not have to convince most Black, Indigenous, or other folks of racialized-colonized communities of this point.) In reflecting on these conversations and others I had with my co-storyers, I began to wonder what has been lost when in dominant discourse, discussions of power are so often centered on privilege, oppression, and resistance, as Ndindi had pointed out. While being critical and naming the oppressor's tactics serves a purpose, here, it has begun to feel like yet another way to center the oppressor's power and to erase the very real powers that have always been available to Indigenous people, people of color, and other oppressed peoples. I asked myself, "*What is the outcome of that erasure? What happens when we forget our power?*" It feels all too clear that by not telling and retelling testimonies of power *beyond* colonial dynamics, we are falling subject to colonial tactics of forgetting and conditioning.

A conversation with Trevor about Hawaiian sovereignty underscored this notion. Michael and I had asked him, what does the Hawaiian movement want folks to know about how to help in the re-establishing of the Kingdom, hopefully in our lifetimes? Trevor responded with a chuckle and a pointed lesson that exposed our prior ignorance:

Trevor: "I'm hoping you've heard this before, but we don't need anything. We don't even need America to leave. Like everybody's like: 'Get sovereignty. Hopefully it happens before you die'. And I agree with some of that. Like, hopefully America leaves before we

die. But we don't need that to happen. Because of what was done in 1843, with Britain, France, and 15 other countries, because of all the treaties that we already have that never got extinguished. And because America never signed a treaty with our queen, we don't need to ask America to do anything. We're still a country. America knows that they are occupying us.” (4)

As he taught us, Michael and I looked at each other with shared acknowledgement of this veil being lifted from our eyes, the version of history we had been told had previously limited us in our understanding of the real power and realities of sovereignty. By obscuring the powers that are contrary to colonialism (those found within Indigenous and collective peoples and their relationships to place), revolution feels distant and imaginary. With the knowledge that there are rightful and collective powers presently operating, we as communities simply need to be made aware of enough to align ourselves to the appropriate channels for such power to become immediate, accessible, and tangible.

Ndindi told me a story about supporting Mama Gloria, a Tongva elder in her seventy's, during a land acknowledgement for an event organized by an apparently white colonizing group posing under progressive banners. In this story, Mama Gloria refused to begin her land acknowledgement until all the folks whom she had invited were present. Because the organization was adhering to colonial versions of time, when fifteen minutes had passed and they wanted to move onto the next item on the schedule, organizers attempted to force Mama Gloria off stage. Ndindi stood with her as they collectively refused to move. Ndindi held onto the mic as organizers attempted to remove it from Mama Gloria and as they instructed the DJ to

crank up the music to try to signal her to leave, even once she had begun to give her land acknowledgement. In this act of desecration and violence by the colonizing organizers of the event, Ndindi and Mama Gloria, two Indigenous women, did not move. Ndindi storied to me:

Ndindi: "I was like, 'Really you cannot do this'. They essentially were like, 'Well, it's 10 o'clock, and no one is here. But since we said you go at 10, Just speak to no one really'. Like, the point of the land acknowledgement is a communal thing. Mama Gloria was not willing to do the land acknowledgement until all of the people she had invited were standing in front of the stage. And it started at 10:30. And we said 'We don't care about your time and your standards'. So we said, 'We're going to wait'. And what is time? Quite frankly, the type of energy they had didn't match ours. So we weren't combative. We just said, 'We acknowledge that. But this, this is what we're doing right now. We're not having a power struggle. We're doing this thing.'" (23)

I considered how their power was expressed in the context of such disrespect. Even as Ndindi told the story, her demeanor was calm, grounded, and authoritative. Though she spoke of being discouraged and disappointed in the event and how it may have shaken Indigenous youth who were present and had to witness their elder being disrespected in such a way, I could not help but take note of the power and calm within both Ndindi and Mama Gloria in the ways she had storied to me as they stood their ground. Perhaps some of this sense of calm comes with a familiarity of this kind of oppression. Black and Indigenous folks have inherited these traumas and have lived these experiences repeatedly through the course of their lives. Yet, beyond the exhaustion of repeated transgression towards them, there is an unshakeable staying power. A testimony that they are still here, still speaking, still standing.

I do not present these stories to suggest that all people can or should attempt to find a way to access this particular power for themselves. I call back to the principle of *by invitation only* in Chapter 6, and further call forward the principle of refusal to remind us non-Indigenous folks that what is not meant for us, is simply not meant for us. We must do a dialogical work within our own communities of *taking up less space* and recognizing that space, knowledge, resources, and identity are all channels of power. Not all channels of power are meant for us. We also can and must heal and become more whole by learning our way deeper into our own identity. That means if your ancestors, as some of mine were, were white folks who participated in colonizing lands, I urge you to learn your way into the truth of that identity. Dialogue with them too. Heal from the colonization they participated in and that many of us continue to participate in and benefit from in these settler-colonial societies.

We cannot heal from these histories and balance the natural order of living communities, including the order of power in place, identity, and Indigeneity, if we are not honest with ourselves about who is who and where we come from and who was where first and who should be first to speak when we gather and who should have the last word. This is not to say we as settler-descended folks *won't* ever be invited. This is to say we *might not*. And that's ok. Our hands should already be very full of the work we have to do within ourselves and within our own communities. We can still learn by listening, we can listen without intruding or taking up space. As Ndindi has said: **"We have to listen to the group of people who seem to know something more about how to have this better relationship with each other and our planet. And**

that which sustains us.” (26) Many lessons are available to us on our necessary journey. For educators, this journey is of utmost importance because we have a unique opportunity as ones within school communities to usher others and support one another along the path of this necessary journey, unique to each of us in our place and identity.

Power as Communion

As I have illustrated this idea of *communion* throughout my findings, I believe that the power inherent in communion emerges as: power to heal, power to dialogue, power to bring together, power to understand and empathize, power in sharing and exchanging, power to creating the collective out of the individual, power to transform. Through communion, all of us, regardless of identity, can find our way to a sense of belonging and purpose. Furthermore, by forming authentic communities through communion and organizing ourselves within those communities according to gifts and responsibilities, we are able to access a collective power that can contest systems of privilege and oppression.

While I have already offered several stories of communion at Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School, the notion of power implicit within those stories, here I will present a few examples of what this power can look like when personal capacity and gifts are developed to become collective strength in unity. This power is witnessed in connected transformations of self, community, and the greater society or natural environment.

One of the first conversations in which I began to picture the collective power of these communities, was listening to Trevor speak to me and Michael about how overrun the campus

had become since the pandemic, weeds and bushes overgrown and trees needing trimming.

Trevor: “Our students know how to work. We can transform this place in a day, 150 kids just going. The little ones? All this grass on the path, they just blast that out. This garden will get blasted out, all the trees get trimmed, and everything moved. That's just good fun.” (4)

I thought about how satisfying an experience it must be to be a part of something so visceral and visible as the transformation of an entire physical space in one day, everyone with a role, even the little ones, in the collective work. I thought about how such an activity as a lived experience could become an internalized metaphor to live by, much like the hike day has become for me in this experience of research. Once you tap into the power of your individual capacity lending itself to the collective potential, and you witness and experience the transformative power within, it becomes much more difficult to ignore your power and purpose.

Abiding by the capital colonial paradigm requires a level of disconnect from personal and collective potential and power; by living unaware of such power, we are held dependent on settler-state structures, fearful of dismantling industrialized infrastructures. Tapping into authentic, decolonized, communal power liberates us from such a hold and unifies us in a shared vision and actualization of anti-colonial realities. It is this communal power, as we have witnessed through the findings, which brought spaces such as Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School in being. It is this communal power that was expressed in the organized presence of *kanaka*, many of whom were the people of Hālau Kū Māna and other Hawaiian

charter schools, to unify in protocol on Mauna Kea and resist the building of the thirty-meter telescope on their sacred mountain. The visibility of the *mana*, power, which was broadcast in that movement, further amplifying collective power to organize, resist, and self-determine throughout many other Indigenous and colonized communities all over the earth. Collective power then begets collective power. This is what I mean by *power as communion*, our sharing of ourselves, our struggles, and our triumphs, a fortification of all other movements of alignment.

Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School have illustrated ways in which *communal schools* can serve as the training ground and apprentice shop for such practices of accessing communal power to be honed and elevated. Trevor shared with me that the protocol that took place over all those days on Mauna Kea, was largely a continuation of the training that many of those *kanaka* activists had received during their education at Hālau Kū Māna. The school recognizes itself to be far more than a place in which to give a K-12 education by state standards. More importantly to the vision of the school, it is a place where *kanaka* become empowered Hawaiians, equipped to stand their ground and take up space that is rightfully theirs, resisting settler occupation, and actualizing futures in accordance with their collective desires.

I conceptualize *school as communion*, then, as a place positioned to allow its communities access and to this power of communion, through developing one's personal capacity and rooting it within the collective potential. It is by channeling this communal power and enacting it within real movements, that self-determination and anti-colonial projects are translated

from within the school communities and into larger political and social contexts.

Power as Spirit

For many colonized communities, religion as a tool of colonization worked to disconnect and transmute Indigenous and non-Judeo-Christian people's understandings and relationships with spirituality, thereby diminishing their access to power as spirit. For many of these collective cultures, spirituality is understood within notions such as connectedness among all life forms, the natural world connected to the supernatural world, and humanity being a manifestation of a spiritual experience. Such an experience and understanding of spirituality stands in direct opposition to the ideologies of Christianity and individual salvation, humans as of greater importance than other forms of life, specifically European, which largely underscored imperialism and colonial missions, justifying violence and war. Despite this history of colonization, *power as spirit* has continued to be an authentic experience and source of knowledge and identity for many colonized peoples (Aluli-Meyer, 2008; Dei, 2002; hooks, 2009; Kovach, 2009).

Spirituality in education is still a nebulous topic, prone to reductionism or exotification. Spirituality is often spoken of in terms of religion or in basic western knowledge of non-Western forms of spirituality, often taking on a New Age or contemplative flavor. Yet scholars such as hooks (2003) and Dei (2002) emphasize spirituality in community schooling as a part of authentic, critical, and anti-colonial education.

I experienced at Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School, two non-religious

schools, that space for spirit was held in powerfully authentic simplicity. I did not find spiritual practices written in any curriculum or mission statements. But in being open and listening deeply, I saw an anti-colonial embodiment of the *power as spirit* in many non-demonstrative ways. I saw that many members of these communities just held space and supported the experiences of humanity that were fostered in many corners and layers of these learning places. I share these stories here delicately. They are sacred, and in many ways, you may not understand. In the words of Ndindi, “you just had to be there”.

Remember, our being in all spaces (especially sacred places), is only by invitation. It is my honor to have connected with Ndindi and Trevor in their schools, one a Hālau and the other an amalgamation of embodied spiritualities, both schools a place to be fully human, where to be human means to be spirit and to be connected to all that which is also spirit. With the permission of my co-storyers, we invite you to listen to these sacred stories of spirit and consider with us what power and authenticity may emerge in our own lives and communities when we make space, even in school, for power as spirit to emerge.

Spirituality first began to emerge as a thematic finding to me while I was still spending time with Trevor at Hālau Kū Māna in September. A sense of deeper power and unspoken structure kept presenting itself to me in several non-direct ways in which Trevor had been speaking about the school, about respect and power, and about certain folks within the community who hold a level of leadership that I couldn’t understand according to the bureaucratic organization of the school. After almost three weeks together, and several

different attempts on my part to verbalize and ask about what I was sensing, Trevor shared with me the spiritual significance of being *Hālau Kū Māna*:

Trevor: “Hālau conotes *hula*, or at least, in a traditional school, it would have to have a Kumu Hula. So, to me, to Imai, to Kalei, to Auntie Ui, to some of us, the *kumu hula* was in charge of Hālau Kū Māna, above the principal.” (15)

This was the first time that a deeper understanding of *hula* began to be illuminated for me, as though the sun was peeking over the mountains and shining on something that had always been there, I just hadn’t ever seen it. I had witnessed the presence and reverence that *oli* bears at the school: more than a chant, it is a unified expression of their collective power. *Oli* is taught as a part of *hula*. Suddenly, I almost sensed shame in realizing how colonized my concept of *hula* had been up until this point; despite my time with the school community for this long, the first images of *hula* to arrive in my mind were still colonized bastardizations of dances done at contrived *luaus* for tourists. In Trevor’s teaching, and in other places in the school, I had heard the stories of *hula* as a ceremony to the gods for rain, for power, in gratitude. *Hula* was not for humans. *Hula* has always been for the gods. For the first time this understanding settled inside me. Trevor continued:

Trevor: “Staff that have come in through the like ‘I’m applying to be a teacher’ door, are in a different place than like, ‘I want to work at Halau Ku Mana because that’s the only place to seek to worship Kū’.” (15)

A place to worship Kū. Hālau Kū Māna. My mind was working out the language that I had now acquired and began to piece together: *hālau*: a school of *hula*, *māna*: supernatural power, *Kū*: one

of the four Hawaiian gods, the god this school was devoted to. This is what I had been sensing all along. There was something much deeper here than a charter school bound to the Department of State. Something that existed beyond the funding and board and administration. Something the community had channeled and actualized that was timeless, a continuation of their years of existence, a testimony to their genealogy. Above all else, Hālau Kū Māna is a place to worship Kū. The *ahu*, the stone altar at the center of campus, is not a metaphor or a token of culture. It is a geographic touchstone where communion with the spiritual realm takes place. Trevor explained:

Trevor: “We’re the only school that like, is like, ‘No, this is real. Yeah, this altar is real. This altar is actually connected to that. And it affects everything. And when the clouds change, and the wind blows, and rain falls when we chant, that’s us. And to take on that, kuleana, you have to have a Kumu Hula.” (15)

This spiritual existence of the school is not overt. I gathered that one of the reasons it isn’t overt is for the purposes of inclusion. Many families of many faiths attend the school, and there is no mission to impose a religious beliefs system on anyone at the school, but Trevor attested to me that only one or two people, due to other faiths, don’t approach the altar. For others, even those who are of other religious beliefs, they also are “all in” in their belief of the Hawaiian spirituality practiced daily at the school.

During my time with Ndindi the following month, I had a parallel experience in which my final conversation with her during the scheduled data-collection period landed organically on the topic of spirituality.

Ndindi: “Our community is an actual physical space, but it’s also a place where within whatever type of spirituality you are about, that that part of you can also be nurtured. And we care about that. And we found people of all different kinds of faith traditions. We’ll hear parents say like, ‘That’s an important part, it’s not just the social emotional, but our child’s spiritual growth, the parts of it that we’re interested in, there’s an opportunity for that here’. So that’s important to us too. We would like this to be a place where you can nurture that aspect of yourself and your growth.” (24)

Ndindi also revealed to me how her approach to fostering this inclusive form of spiritual growth is grounded in her Indigenous identity:

Ndindi: “For Kamba people, we have a saying that is considered kind of really an evil thing to impose your kind of spirituality on to other people. So, all the rituals and things when you do them, and people are there, you invite them and they participate. Even among the same tribe, if someone lives below the valley, or whatever, usually starts with, ‘we are so and so we’re the people of the hill. This is how we have understood, and we always faced this and we do that we invite you. But we also would like to hear from you.’ And then the next person might say, ‘We are the people who are by whatever River, usually what we have done in the morning, we’ll do like a cleansing thing. Thank you for the invitation. We’re happy to participate in this thing today.’ And they’ll say ‘Okay, then tomorrow, you need to come down to our river and participate with us.’ So that’s kind of how we do it.” (24)

Ndindi further described how colonizing religions historically entered their spaces and were in stark contrast to the inclusive and reciprocal relationships of the original people with their diverse spiritual practices:

Ndindi: “So when the missionaries came, we invited them. We’re like, ‘Oh, that’s cool. Okay, you’re from a Europe place. Show us your thing. Okay, here’s our thing, we invite

you'. Of course, they didn't do it. Instead, it ended up going completely the other way where now everyone's kind of caught up doing that thing. And so the real violation there is that they never reciprocated. That to us is the true violation. Not that anyone has a problem with a European Jesus. But the true violation is you refuse to participate with us. And then you coerced us to participate in your thing. And your thing is devoid of relationship. It's devoid of the core. So that's why we really can't get behind it. But we encourage you to find the core." (24)

Because presenting ideas around spirituality are so intrinsically and delicately connected to identity, and in these examples in particular, to Indigeneity, I sought out my guides, Trevor and Ndindi, once again to help me put these understandings of *spirit* into shared language. As I present the words of my co-storyers in this section, I do so in longer uninterrupted pieces, feeling that the weight and authenticity of their testimony is best conveyed here in the whole. Ndindi spoke about how *spirituality* is understood and nurtured at her school:

Ndindi: "My understanding of students is being spiritual beings without needing to impose any kind of form of spirituality. I think that's an important part of it. We recognize students are not just students, there's more to them. And it is not within your right to dominate that, or to push against that, however they understand divinity or what have you. And to also give it space to be nurtured and to thrive without a traditional religious school where it's like, 'This is what it is to report down', but also not like a kind of strange secularism where you completely kind of deny that aspect of people and then you don't really have any guidance or conversation around it. And yet, I think a lot of the literature suggests teenagers are super curious about existential questions for themselves. So why are we pretending not to talk about these things? So we try a little bit more at our school to work with students where they are and the questions they have.

For example, the Black students will talk a lot about ancestors. That's something I'm connected with. Then you have others who are from a little bit more traditional mainstream backgrounds, but even with that, we're seeing them pushing back at these grand narratives. And also questioning colonization. So if you're Persian, and you are Catholics, you need to do something in there for you to like, be a fully committed practicing Catholic. There are questions you need to answer for yourself. And a lot of times, you don't like the answers and therefore you let that go. You know, so I think it is a gift, really, for me and Scott to be able to work with students as they ask these types of things, because I am so unqualified, but I'm there and I present and I'm willing. Spiritual questions are the ones that are more important than, you know, the task to be done, because then the task to be done is in service to that, right?" (26)

Trevor then followed with his testimony of spirituality at Hālau Kū Māna, distinguishing their school as the only one among the Hawaiian charter schools which practiced authentic Hawaiian spirituality, yet having influence over others within the Hawaiian school network to begin participating in spiritual rituals at least for cultural purposes:

Trevor: I was thinking about the Hawaiian-focused charter schools, 18 of us, and I wanted to say that I think we're the only pagan one, the rest are very Christian. But I think that Ndindi is saying what I'm thinking. Like, it's a very dangerous space. The charter school movement, 1988, I think Minnesota or Wisconsin, was started by the far right. And it had a lot to do with the idea of vouchers and privatizing public money so that they could have Christian schools. And so it's funny that here we are, if it's a linear system, I guess we'd be on the far left. So we also have Christian schools because for better or for worse, you know, foreign powers brought a lot of Christianity into Hawaii. But I think the way in which our charter school embodies our spirituality is actually a really positive thing in almost every instance. I don't really see a whole lot of

colonization inherent in it because we have control of the structure of the institutions. And so, it's I think it's less of like, Christian religion and more of Christian values. And then for us here at our school. Even though we have a lot of Christians, we're still able to get away with teaching what I think the world would deem 'pagan' values and 'pagan' religion because we're just categorizing it as 'culture'. And that's the loophole that we use is that like, 'We're not teaching spirituality, we're just teaching our "culture". And part of our culture is knowing who the ancient gods were. Emphasis on past tense. Even Kamehameha schools, this gigantic institution, I just heard last week that they've kind of changed, been opened up their willingness to participate in Makahiki, which is our pagan harvest festival, because they're just continuing to try and like, pull it into, 'Well, it's part of the culture so we should allow it to be taught in schools'. And it's all this social pressure because students are curious, they're interested in it. They're not just children, they're people. And they have a right to know what their ancestors did. And so even from 100 households it's starting to, like, I don't know if they call it ceremony, but let's pretend this is what the ceremony would have looked like in the present, essentially, allowing us to continue to practice old religion under the guise of, 'We're just learning culture'. And so that's the loophole that we operate within. And that is the motive for everybody coming to school is because really, everybody's looking for belonging, and at the center of belonging is spirituality. And so if you can provide a school where you're allowed to be spiritual and have spiritual values, then you're going to feel ownership over your education. And that's why I think, to some extent, this school breaks down the borders, or the walls of public education, because it's not secular and it's also not colonial religious." (26)

In Trevor's testimony, the words that continued to ring in my ears were: *"Everybody coming to school is because really, everybody's looking for everybody's looking for belonging, and at the center of*

belonging is spirituality". This resonated deeply with me, as someone who does not practice any religion but who highly regards all human endeavors to seek answers to existential questions and to narrate the magic we experience within the natural world and in harmonized systems and in relationships of commune. It seemed evident to me within the context of colonial limitation to belief systems, creation stories, and spiritual practices housed under a single western religion in which schools have been a hard-fought battleground, that for these schools to exist *as schools* and simultaneously as authentically spiritual spaces is undeniably to exemplify a radical existence and a space for radical belonging. In creating spaces in which each person can access their own spiritual experience and allow it to inform the collective consciousness, Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School illustrated the radical way for schools to exist beyond colonizing conceptions of power, and actualize spaces of true community, power, and belonging.

Summary

To exist radically is not to exist according to a prescription. The stories and analysis I have offered in this chapter are not intended to argue how others should live or aim to have their schools. Rather, they are offered in communion for rumination by our audience, for collective dialogue and co-grappling, grounded in our specific contexts, and looking to the knowledge of the original people of each place for guidance, as we walk forward according to our invitations and *kuleana*, together pushing the needle of collective understanding and possibility. This work and living calls for authenticity and for us to be honest with our

contradictions, dialoguing with ourselves and our communities about what contradictions we can live with and which ones we must refuse as we negotiate this process of decolonization and manifestation of imaginaries. This process brings us deeper into our spiritual selves, as a facet of our humanity in wholeness. This journey is never finished, as a requisite for being radical and experimental. There will always be new questions to consider, latest information to process, and unfamiliar contexts to navigate. As such, the existence of authentic radical communities as natural living systems is one of recursive, ongoing, and unfinished communion—being, sharing, and existing always differently than before, with intention and in power, yet towards conditions of stability and sustainability in peace and harmony with everything.

From the beginning, this study sought the radical—as much critical research does—to answer questions about who is pushing the needle of progress and how have those folks answered the questions we are asking in this research for themselves. Many educators and researchers have sought to find solutions to the problems and limitations we continuously experience in schools. Many critical educators and researchers examine and discuss these problems through the lens of capitalism and colonization. Some research and movements around alternative versions of school, such as charter schools and autonomous schools, have generally tried to answer these questions in generalities and have often left specific communities and identities out of the conversation, causing many to feel dissatisfied and disconnected from these offerings.

My dissertation study does not aim for generalities but invites readers to consider what feels in common or resonant to their experience and the needs of their communities. In discussion of various intersections of identity and experiences within dominant school models, in the shared context of colonization, we begin to touch on ideas that many of us recognize, as what is radical is what dismantles and replaces that which is dominant. In this chapter, the stories gathered and presented throughout this research are looked through the lens of asking: *How does this contest, subvert, and dismantle dominant, oppressive, colonial systems of power?* Power is framed in ways beyond privilege and wealth as products of colonialism, found instead in place, identity, Indigeneity, communion, and spirit. The stories of Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School and of Trevor and Ndindi along with the other radical educators in these spaces, help us to situate our reframed discussions of power and to see the possibilities within *school as communion* to be places of revolutionary transformation for their communities.

Chapter 9 – Belonging

From the beginning, the question I held at the center of my research was really a question about belonging. Looking back further, I can't seem to remember a time in my life when I wasn't seeking answers about where and in what ways I belong. I can't remember not being concerned with belonging for others, too, especially in places of learning. Perhaps this is a universally human experience. As is the nature of doing a type of research which allows the findings to emerge for themselves, I was surprised, in a way, to find that central to this entire study and story was one of belonging. A story of folks who at one time did not feel they belonged, especially in dominant, colonizing contexts. A story of finding and creating belonging for oneself and for others. A story of school as places of belonging. A story of kinship. A story of *kipuka*. A story of devotion to places and people in which we find belonging. This story of belonging is intimately connected to service and responsibility. In this chapter, I invite you to hear of our experiences and realizations about belonging and to ask yourself where and in what ways you and your communities find and create belonging; this is a radical and necessary work.

Seeking Belonging

Regardless of who we are, we all need belonging. I cannot ignore the impact that colonization has had in destroying places and experiences of belonging for many. In this world of division, violence, and oppression, belonging is not only threatened, but it has also been reduced to an after-thought, especially in conversations about education. I think about all the times my students suffered because they did not feel that they belonged. How many children

struggle to go to school? To connect with others? To find purpose in their life? How many suffer alone with thoughts of suicide? To feel that you do not belong is to experience dehumanization and disconnection with the natural world, to forget our spirit and community, and be reduced to products of colonization (Darder, 2015). In conversations with so many people throughout my life and in sustained reflection of my own story, I believe we all are seeking belonging until we find or create it. And even then, perhaps, it is an unfinished journey.

Trevor and Ndindi shared with me several stories about how they struggled to feel belonging at different points in their life. For Trevor, growing up without the knowledge of his Hawaiian ancestry and presenting as a mostly white male, he struggled in school to feel comfortable with his identity. He did not want to be associated with the other white students at his school, nor did he feel similar to them. Yet in a predominantly Japanese school, he did not fully feel that he fit in. Additionally, he grew up as he says, “the poorest person” he knows. Yet as an excellent student in gifted programs, he was surrounded by students of families who were much more well off than he was. His unique family upbringing contributed to a sense of difference rather than belonging during those early years. On the one hand, Trevor’s family lived in strikingly decolonized ways by foraging for their capital and living with intimate knowledge of plants and nature, yet on the other hand they existed in stark contrast to the colonized and economically more advantaged lives of the children around him. Trevor storied to me a bit of what it felt like growing up in Hilo:

Trevor: “White people are minority in Hilo, but it feels like that because it is so Japanese.

Waiakea High School was just like every teacher is Japanese. And every student council person is Japanese. You know, all coaches. You just see, feel your whiteness. But I mean, it's not racism. It's just you know, 'Oh, there's a white kid acting like a white kid'. And I'm trying not to be that.” (1)

For Trevor, coming to Hālau Kū Māna and finding a home and purpose for his knowledge and lived experiences allowed him the chance to create and experience belonging, even before discovering his Hawaiian identity and thus developing a further sense of kinship within the greater Hawaiian community. At Hālau Kū Māna, Trevor began to reframe the ways he grew up and the knowledge he had about native plants and growing and being resourceful as true capital and useful knowledge. Furthermore, he began to connect his layered and complex identity to a community who *asked* for his service—service that directly stewarded the places and land he has always known as home.

Ndindi storied to me the many ways that she struggled to feel true belonging as it related to many of her intersectional identities. Prior to creating Angeles Workshop School, though she had always been an adept learner, she had many stories of dissatisfaction and disconnection throughout her schooling experiences. In high school, she experienced an unhealthy amount of pressure leading her to eventually withdraw and re-enroll elsewhere in an attempt to heal from the severe stress on her body. At her university, her queer identity was not only accepted, but it was also threatened in many coercive and dehumanizing ways. She also witnessed many others being treated inhumanely and her advocacy for them led to further oppression she experienced by the institution. As an immigrant and Indigenous woman in the

U.S., Ndindi has often said that her lived experiences and outlook on life is different from others around her. As an educator, she struggled to accept the status quo and go along with rules just for the sake of compliance, especially when the structure of the institution seemed to be at odds with the well-being of herself and the students she cared for. Ndindi expressed to me that her creation of Angeles Workshop School was born “out of the dissatisfaction” she experienced in so many other places.

Dissatisfaction, not seeing ourselves reflected in our environment, not sensing alignment with the customs and practices of the organizations we participate in, fear of being our true selves or facing oppression when we are our true selves, having urges to try to change our environment or move into new spaces because we do not feel like we can thrive, all speak to experiences of unbelonging. As I consider these aspects of the stories of unbelonging that were told to me and contrast them with the testimonies emergent from Angeles Workshop School and Hālau Kū Māna, I gathered together a picture of belonging and what it looks and feels like. From Makana, I learned that belonging was a sense of safety to be vulnerable and trust that you have support from those around you. From Jo, I learned belonging was seeing aspects of yourself, your interests and identity, reflected in the ones you are learning from and in your environment. From Caeden and Kaleo, I learned that belonging was a feeling of an open door you can walk through at any time, was people who would draw out your potential and “keep you in line”, was knowing that the words and actions of those around you were grounded in love. From Ndindi I learned that belonging was a sense of freedom for your true self to be nurtured

and brought into service. From Scott, I learned that belonging was a place where you can advocate for yourself and others, making the marginalized to others the norm to yourselves. From Trevor, I learned that belonging was a home and family, coming together to “row in the same direction”.

Though for many of us, this story of belonging begins or includes chapters of unbelonging and seeking belonging, we look to these stories to understand the importance of belonging and to help shape our collective understanding of what belonging can look and feel like. As with other ideas presented in this study, creating belonging is not a matter of prescription or one-dimensionality. It is yet another form of *communion*—relational, dialogical, contextual, personal, spiritual, and unfinished (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2003). For those who are seeking belonging, school, as places of communion, holds the radical possibility to become sites in which many find and create belonging and the safety, purpose, and rest that experiencing belonging provides (Dei, 2008; hooks, 2003, 2009).

Finding Yourself in a Place & Creating Places of Belonging

This study centers on the lived stories of ones who have created or contributed to the sustaining of schools as places which belong to the community and in which the community can feel they belong. Trevor and Ndindi, in their intimate knowing of what it means to seek and find belonging, have brought their personal experiences of creating belonging into their own learning places and have made and held space for those who enter to co-create a sense of belonging for themselves and for one another. This process includes invitation and welcoming,

dialogue and relationship, much time, and allowing others space to belong as you find your own space of belonging.

Because belonging is precious and elusive for many, it is critical that those of us who have learned how to find belonging also create places and opportunities for others to belong. As I discuss the notions of finding belonging and creating spaces of belonging, as they emerged from the stories as data, I am grounded in the breadth of the data, remembering that belonging is emergent from communion formed in relationship, taking much time, waiting for invitation, seeking reciprocity, facing settle-colonial structural barriers and resisting them collectively, and exploring our full humanity which brings us to our spiritual selves. In seeing this holistically, we have to understand that belonging is not quickly or easily achieved. It is arrived at through a process of intention and collective action. We also have to keep in mind the principles of Indigeneity and insider-outsider dynamics of communities and spaces. Not everywhere is meant for everyone. We must honor that reality yet remember that it doesn't mean we can't belong *somewhere*; we have a responsibility to listen, to learn, and to journey ourselves into more authentic belonging for ourselves. We must also remember that authentic belonging is not one directional; it is born out of service and reciprocity. We will never belong if we only take. We must learn what is our role to fulfill and what are our gifts to give.

Ndindi and Scott were intentional about the space they wanted to create with Angeles Workshop School, and who they wanted to belong there. The students they knew they needed to serve are the ones that often experience unbelonging the most in the dominant school systems—

those marginalized by race, class, culture, neurotype, gender, sexuality, disability, interests, belief systems. While there is not one “type” of student at Angeles Workshop School, I was able to witness the beauty of this “deep agreement” that Ndindi spoke to me of– a sense that for the members of the community, no matter who you are or who you decide to be tomorrow, you are accepted here, as long as you can contribute to the harmony and well-being of the collective whole. This sense of alignment and harmony is not automatic, and Ndindi shared insight to me across many conversations that have illuminated how they have been able to arrive as a place of belonging for their members. Ndindi is clear that not everyone who first expresses interest in the school is necessarily a good fit. This notion of vetting isn't based on merit, class, or affiliation. Rather the sensing of “fit” is dialectical and, in some ways as I gathered, spiritual. In dialogue about desires and interests, Ndindi and prospective families mutually negotiate their affinity to one another and their ability to carry out reciprocity. If a sense of mutuality is lacking, then that family naturally isn't invited into their school space or may themselves elect to stop pursuing access to the school. In this sense, the formation of relationships mirrors the principles we discussed in Chapter 6, holding to values embedded within Indigenous and collective cultures.

Beyond invitation, as a member within the community, belonging is grown and sustained within the same principle of mutuality and reciprocity. That is, a member's *experience* of belonging is dependent on the degree to which they participate, to be in relationship with, to communicate and collectively share and form a vision by which all may row towards, and to be

in service and in reciprocity. I saw this in stories shared with me from members of both Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School that illuminated what happens when a member does not align or continue to align with the collective whole. Shared with respect and humanity, these stories illustrated to me the process of exit that occurs when a member does not “fit” within a certain space. These stories are not sanctioned for discussion in this study, yet I draw on my realizations in hearing those stories to express that the collective belonging of the community is further safe-guarded by the knowing that not everyone has to belong everywhere and that removal or exit of certain mis-aligned members can be natural, humanizing, and liberating for all.

Thus, in the creation of spaces for belonging, we may allow ourselves to experience this aspect of dialogical relating—one that involves pruning and weeding as a process by which we create space for all to thrive. I recall the example of the Native Forest on my hike with Hālau Kū Māna, and the example nature gives us about species who come together to create a thriving biosphere. How the plants communicate with one another to grow in levels, all ensuring the adequate and equitable (not necessarily equal) amount of sunlight, water, and nutrients to be delivered to each member. How negotiations of space and function are worked out harmoniously. As outsiders who may find ourselves entering, even being invited into spaces we are not native to, I remember Trevor’s words to “be like the laua’e fern”, a non-native species who has become accepted by the community as useful and valuable, never taking up too much space and working in harmony with the natural environment.

Finding belonging and creating spaces of belonging are truly a symbiotic process. The more we attend to belonging for others, the more we find those with whom we belong. The more we recognize why we belong where we do, the more we are able to usher others who may align within the spaces of belonging that we co-create. Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School demonstrate the possibility of communal schools to offer opportunities to be in such a symbiotic environment of belonging. We as educators who desire to meet the needs of our community must create and sustain schools as places for belonging.

Kinship

Integral to a collective experience of belonging within any community are the relationships formed among its members. The relationships I witnessed and experienced at Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School and that I was able to form with Trevor and Ndindi and Scott felt much deeper and more connected than the relationships I have always known to exist on a much more cursory level within other school or academic spaces. The outcome of forming deeper relationships that felt like family was having schools where most people feel comfortable to be themselves. This suggests to me that by developing these relationships beyond those commonly experienced in a settler-colonial society into ones of kinship, such as those valued within cultures of Indigenous and collective peoples, folks are able to establish and maintain deeper connection and thus more sustained experiences of belonging.

Though families are not perfect, and colonialism has oppressed the family structure and inflicted trauma (often generational trauma) within many families, if we look to authentic,

Indigenous, and collective cultures' examples of family, we often see a picture of sustainability and cooperation. Through the sharing of resources, the longevity of relationship, deep knowing and understanding, shared interest and goals, being informed by similar contexts, and love for one another, families and units of kinship are able to sustain one another and create environments for each member to thrive.

In many of the stories shared with me by the folks of Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School, a sense of kinship was established. We recall Caeden and Kaleo referring to their *kumu* as parent figures, Kaleo even saying that what he does for the school feels like what he would do for his *ohana*. In many instances as I was listening to Ndindi, I would remark, “that sounds so motherly, you are really raising these children as your own”, to which she responded:

Ndindi: “I feel like it's the least you can do is be there and like really support and just two adults are not going to be able to really nurture a child themselves, if we want this kind of generational nurturing. And I think nurturing is important too, because I see the kids nurture each other.” (24)

Ndindi seemed to be speaking to a notion of raising children collectively, beyond the two-parent (or sometimes less) idea of family that has become so wide-spread in industrialized hegemony. Her notion of responsibility to nurture the children in her life as a part of a community, and to have that nurturing transcend into a generational form of communal care, simultaneously speaks to her Indigenous epistemologies and to her active resistance to colonial structures.

Kinship also speaks to the relationships that Ndindi fosters among the families of

Angeles Workshop School. In one instance, one family took in another into their home to help care for them as they were enduring challenging times. This sharing of resources, grounded in deep trust and mutual love and respect, defies the settler-colonial narrative of independence and competition. In schools of dominant institutions many relationships do not extend past the classroom, much less into one another's homes, bringing in parents and other family members into relationships of trust and reciprocity.

To foster kinship in communal schools, to create sustained relationships of belonging, is a decolonizing work. Beginning within the school and extending into the families and the communities, belonging through kinship subverts the colonial agendas of disconnections and divide and conquer.

Kipuka

Often people shy away from attempting to have deeper relationships with folks because they fear the weight of having to sustain those relationships or potential hurt that comes with losing relationships or having relationships fail. This idea of sustainability within relationships and creating conditions of belonging for many is an important one to explore, as many of us face personal and social constraints that bring us into a flux of defining and redefining what our community is and how we belong within it. On this topic, Trevor shared with me a story of *kipuka* as a lesson and illustration on the natural capacity and potential for living systems to sustain themselves over generations and environmental change, each *kipuka* specific to its place and working to maintain the balance and belonging for the species within. This illustration of

kipuka can serve to guide our own wonderings as we experiment with and navigate our own stories of finding and creating belonging. Trevor pulled up a Google satellite image of a lava flow on the Big Island and began to instruct:

Trevor: “I’m thinking about kipuka, which is like a really clear metaphor for many folks here. Kipuka is a little more familiar term that a lot of other folks know, because that’s where we get our seeds from. So this volcano erupted for 35 years. This one was in ‘69 and ‘74, up until a couple of years ago. And so it looks like absolute utter destruction. Why is this called the Kipuka? So it’s a place where the lava went around and that place will continue to grow. It’s like a Native American homestead or reservation in a sense, like the seed bank is still strong. And not only that, as soon as the lava cools down, these trees start to hop back out onto the lava flow. And so leaving Halau Ku Mana is like leaving our kipuka where everybody knows everybody, we all are in balance. These trees have evolved together and so there’s no bullies, and there’s nobody trying to dominate. But once you leave that, you’re competing with grass seeds and all kinds of other stuff but when those kinds of seeds try to come into a kipuka, every last space is spoken for and taken up, and so it’s very difficult for invasive species to take hold in a kipuka. But in this new land, it’s just a straight up fight, it’s a battleground. And this is where most of us are fighting the fight. It’s just been comforting if you’ve ever walked across a lava flow for a few miles, and then you get inside one of these, it’s like the temperature drops 20 degrees and it’s shady. And you just hike across the desert for like seven miles and you get here and there’s fresh water. The spring you can swim in, there’s coconut trees, and the land is really old and there’s plenty of soil. And so, Halau Ku Mana, is not the oldest kipuka. There’s so many generations of lava flows here, like these kipuka. These kipuka, some of them are 100 year old forests and some of them are 1,000 year old forests and some of them are 10,000 and there’s actually like 100,000 year old forests that are now

surrounded by lava. And so the potency and the pristineness is different in different places. So Hālau Kū Māna is not the most pristine place for cultural practice like, you know, we're all, I think first generation practitioners. Whereas if you went to Keokaha, this is a much older community. They've been there since the 1920's. But If you were to go to Weloihi, now these guys have been fishing down here for 2,000 years. So this is a different level of *kipuka* than we're at. But, um, but I like Makiki." (20)

In this story and metaphor of *kipuka*, we once again gather a sense of symbiosis and harmony, sustainability and longevity. As Trevor spoke of the different *kipuka* that existed around the island, he noted that they have existed for different lengths of time and each have a different composition of species within, giving each their own distinct characteristics as a whole. He extends this metaphor to the human communities who have sustained themselves for hundreds and even thousands of years, displaying the same qualities of harmony within its members and distinctness to other communities. He ended with a simple admission of "I like Makiki". To me, that sentence summed up what belonging sounds like. The *kipuka* in Makiki, Hālau Kū Māna, is the one in which Trevor has existed symbiotically for many years. It is here that Trevor has experienced the magic of his community. He told me, **"The magic exists between us, not within any one of us. It's synergistic."** (17) While there may be thriving communities elsewhere, each with its own magic and essence, this one in Makiki is where he has felt belonging.

Another important takeaway for me from Trevor's metaphor of *kipuka* was this notion that *kipuka* is what sustains us, especially in our fight to survive harsh conditions and oppressive environments. As Trevor spoke of "this is where most of us are fighting the fight" he

pointed to the image of the wide expanse of harsh lava. I understood intuitively that he was referencing all the spaces of settler-colonial institutions, spaces where we fight to dismantle and fight for justice. In the *kipuka*, the synergy is protection; “every space is accounted for” making invasion almost impossible. Not only is the formation of such synergistic communities such as *kipuka* a way for us to belong, but it is also a means of resisting settler-colonialism, of taking back space. *Kipuka* are the “seed banks”; despite the lava flow, they are spaces where some have grown through the harsh new environment and together created an oasis to sustain generations of new seeds. In the same way, those who went before us to break the harsh ground on the frontlines against colonialism have become the original trees others may grow under and around as they form their collective *kipuka*. The knowledge and practices preserved within are the seeds for generations of sustained existence.

For each of us looking for belonging, we can look to this metaphor for guidance and encouragement. We may be weary from trying to survive in a lava flow, yet as we learn ourselves and commune with others, as we begin to more deeply understand the spaces we are connected to and the people with whom we have shared genealogy, by blood or culture or invitation, and as we begin to develop a sense of synergy and reciprocity, we find ourselves closer to those who have gone before who now offer shade and space for us to grow. If space is not offered to us, they may not be our *kipuka*. However, if we find ourselves growing and thriving, giving and sharing, existing in mutuality and reciprocity, then we can be encouraged that we are contributing to the sustaining of spaces of belonging within and resistance without,

nurturing one another and transforming the landscape around us.

Devotion—A Place to Stay, A Place to Serve

As I reflected on what I had learned about belonging from Hālau Kū Māna and Angeles Workshop School, I was brought back to our principles of reciprocity and humility, of seeing ourselves collectively rather than individually, and to our awareness that nothing we seek is something to which we are entitled, but rather, is a fruit of our collective growth and labor. Belonging seems, then, to be an experience that is brought about by and through *devotion*. Beyond the idea of commitment—a commitment to spend enough time in one place and with one group of people to experience belonging—devotion connotes an awareness of service and even spirituality in such commitment. In this sense, belonging is the story we tell when we have devoted ourselves in communion with others to the carrying out a specific purpose and role as our service, and as that which brings us further into belonging.

In this sense, belonging, though desirable and valuable, is not without weight and responsibility. Settler-colonialism and white patriarchy promotes a satisfaction without sacrifice, taking without giving. However, in this story of belonging, told by Indigenous and collective peoples about community, sustainability, and transformation, belonging only exists in sustained service to the collective. Makana expressed this when she spoke of the need for everyone to find their own path of service—for her, her path was returning to Hālau Kū Māna as a teacher. To belong then is to commit, to return, to stay, and to serve.

This research has been an integral part of my own path. Those who have guided me

along this path have done so with personal sacrifice. Ndindi and Trevor gave me their time, knowledge, support, and energy in such generous amounts that I wonder how I will ever repay them. As I wondered aloud to Ndindi how I may reciprocate to her and her community for what they have shared with me, Ndindi's response was for me to finish my dissertation and then to return to their space and do something then as the community sees fit. Trevor also spoke of this responsibility for me to put my skills and experience gathered in research to use for the greater community I am now connected to. While this research process has gifted me with a deeper sense of belonging and personal peace than I have ever experienced or understood before in my life, the responsibility that Trevor spoke to me of is heavy. I know that any belonging I hope to have in my future, belonging I hope to make for my children and those whom I love, will be available to me only as I continue to walk my path of service in devotion to the people and places which sustain me.

As Trevor has said, ““Everybody is coming to the school because really, everybody's looking for belonging”. I think that really everybody is journeying through life, seeking relationships, jobs, homes, purpose, interest, fun, rest, meaning, because really, everybody is looking for belonging. Some of us carry entire humans in our own bodies, hoping to birth belonging for ourselves and them. To seek and find belonging is a central human experience, intimate and existential, a matter of life and death. The loneliness of unbelonging is often unbearable and we know many stories of the ones who did not survive feeling as though they did not belong in this world. In writing this, I mourn still for those who did not survive this

loneliness and all those who still struggle with it. As a survivor of unbelonging, I have a responsibility, *kueleana*, to see and story the ways in which we can find and create belonging for ourselves and for one another. I owe it to the ones who saved me. As my *xue jie* Ndindi has said, “I owe it to the generations before me and I owe it to the ones coming after me.”

I have felt profound unbelonging during my journey through academia and through life. But this story closes with a chapter about the ways in which I and the ones who have cared for me in this process have made belonging. I love them for that, and I am eternally grateful. This is the story we are privileged to tell and have the responsibility to tell. If we are ones who have been gifted with testimony to bear about making belonging, then we belong in schools with all those who are seeking belonging for themselves, some who question daily if they will survive. We belong in service to them. They are everywhere in our own communities. Our service, then, is to create places of communion. Places where people may find themselves and find their people. Places where they may find their purpose and spiritual selves. Places where they realize their gifts and are tasked with doing something about it. Places where they are known by name, pronoun, story, family, genealogy, and the versions of themselves that they will be in the future, the ones they are collectively nourished to become. Places where they are asked to stay, to serve, to make home in.

As we witness a community, a natural system of living beings, a *kipuka*, in such devotion, we begin to understand just how profound it is to find “our place in it all” as my friend Ndindi says. It is within our “place in it all” that the collective places of radical belonging are carried out

in communion of peoples, places, and power. What if I told you *schools* can be one of these most powerful places of radical belonging? In the words of my friend Makana, channeling her teachers, “What would you do about it then?”

Chapter 10– Sustaining

As I approach the conclusion of this research process in February of 2022, almost exactly two years after the COVID pandemic shook our entire globe, each day I look across my social platforms or scan through news headlines, I see something that speaks to the uncertainty and frailty of current educational systems everywhere. The pandemic catalyzed a great resignation across many professions, but the effects of teachers exiting en masse felt across the education systems, has been particularly destabilizing. Conversations about the *purpose* of school have become full-blown affronts. For many parents, traditional schooling has not been merely (or even primarily for some) a source of education for their children as much as it has functioned as free childcare for parents during the workday. Revolving lockdowns, sub shortages, and teachers increasingly taking a stand against ever more taxing conditions have shaken the school structure and what many perceived to be a stable institution. Furthermore, emerging from students and extending into families, teachers, and community members alike, the *efficacy and necessity* of traditional education is being called more into question than ever before. The students who have lived through 2 years of pandemic schooling models– much of which include huge pauses in learning, distance-learning models, and modified curriculum– wonder what’s the use of school anyways? The classic curriculum prepared no one for this pandemic and as climate change, economic upheaval, and the birth of non-traditional professions increase, Generation Z and its successors pose the question: Is anything we learn in school useful anymore?

As a educational practitioner, I have never stopped looking for answers and information that would inform and sustain the journey I felt was most necessary for myself and my community of learners: my students, their families, and my comrades talked often about starting a school for ourselves—one where we could be authentic, radical, holistic, humanizing, creative, expressive, and transformative. But we didn't know how or where to begin. We felt materially limited as a working-class community, an outcome of capitalist distribution of wealth, without access to land or common space outside the public-school campus suitable to sustain our communal learning. Additionally, as educators who rely on a paycheck to meet our material needs, exiting our profession to create an alternative school for students whose families cannot afford to pay tuition, felt impossible. Yet, I maintained a curiosity about who has done this, harboring hope of the power within communities to aggregate social capital and materially transform our contexts. This study emerged from such a curiosity, belief in radical possibility, and collective demand for change, for better conditions in which our communities may live and learn.

In this final chapter, I summarize the main findings of this study and discuss the research questions with new insight constructed from the findings. I revisit the theoretical foundations of this research—critical and anti/de/colonial pedagogies, Indigenous knowledges, and theories of sustainable systems and place—to examine the implications this study may surface in (1) expanding theoretical understandings when applied contextually to place, testimony, and phenomenon of communal schools and (2) informing future praxis and policy

emerging from both the academy and within communities at the grassroots who strive to create alternative, authentic, communal schools for themselves. I discuss limitations of this study and reflect on my process with this research. Finally, I offer suggestions to those who may engage with this research and those who may come next on this path, proposing contributions this study may make in informing future research on communal schools as educational alternatives and sustaining the work of communal schools that is already taking place in communities around the world.

What We Learned Along the Way–A Summary of Findings

The aims of this study were to better understand how alternative-autonomous schools were created and sustained by communities at a grassroots level, offering authentic education that is (1) accessible to all, (2) authentic to culture and place, (3) decolonizing, resistant to settler colonial structures, and (4) grounded in place with hands on learning in land stewardship and sustainable practices. By centering on the stories told by the co-storyers of this research, as historians and inside members of their learning communities, this study aimed to illuminate: What theories guide learning and teaching? What epistemologies are embedded in their curriculum and organization? In what ways do these schools benefit their communities, both human and “more-than-human” (i.e., land and nature)? Furthermore, how do these school communities remain sustainable and authentic to their visions within the context of dominant settler-state systems? From the stories as data emerged four key themes which provided general organization under which to nest other findings. These themes along with their key findings

and salient theoretical analysis will be summarized below.

A Necessary Journey

The first theme illuminates the Indigenous paradigm from which these educators and their schools operate, holding central to all work the principles of reciprocity, waiting for invitation, listening to what the community asks for, spending ample time in pause and in process, being personally and collectively reflexive and dialogical, and fulfilling responsibility for what you have been invited by the community to do. These principles inherently contradict the western-colonial paradigm. In adhering to these principles in research and educational practice, we maintain a decolonizing stance (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012). Since this research and the schools included in this study seek to be decolonizing and to contribute to the larger body of understanding and practices in decolonizing work (i.e., Dei, 2014; Smith, 2012; Patel, 2019, Tuck et al, 2014), presentation of this Necessary Journey illustrates how doing the work of communal schools and doing research *with* communal schools is fundamental praxis within an Indigenous and decolonizing paradigm (Berryman et al, 2013; Chilisa, 2020).

School as Communion

This theme illustrates a new paradigm and conception of *school* which challenges dominant school models and illuminates the realm of possibility for schools to become sites of radical embodiment of decolonization (Macedo, 1999; McLaren, 2015), humanization (Freire, 1970), authenticity to place and culture (Dei, 2008; hooks, 2003), interconnection and sustainable systems (Capra & Luisi, 2018), critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), spirituality

(Aluli-Meyer, 2008) and transformation of self, community, and society (Darder, 2015). The storied findings within this chapter expand our understanding of *what* the community-grown alternative-autonomous schools of this study are—an understanding which generated a conception of *schools as communion*—a notion that draws on the communal nature of these schools and encompasses the relational sharing of knowledge, of resources, of thoughts and feelings, of spiritual practice, of transformational skills and consciousness. As a spatially located site, school becomes the meaning-infused place in which communion and communal action takes place (hooks, 2009; Johnson, 2010)—holding revolutionary potential to transform the human and “more-than-human” constituents of its community (Greenwood, 2009; (Meyerhoff & Thompsett, 2017).

The stories in this chapter testify of profound benefit and transformational power for those who experience such communal schools, including: establishing meaningful and lasting relationships, healing, safety, belonging, intergenerational learning, bringing parents and community members into meaningful roles of teaching and learning, acquisition of transformative knowledge and skills, cultural memory making, activation of political agency, collective activism, and transformative and sustainable practices of ecology. These stories also testify to a stabilizing trend (Capra & Luisi, 2018; Meadows, 2008) within these communal schools, indicating that although such schools face challenges and risks in divesting from and resisting the dominant settler-colonial structures, through community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) these schools demonstrate the ability to endure, to stabilize, and to strengthen radical

possibilities for future generations who seek alternatives in education.

A Radical Existence

This theme surfaces and underscores how these communal schools testify to resisting colonial impositions, challenging dominant structures, and disrupting power away from the settler-colonial systems (Dei, 2003; McLaren, 2015) through the amplification of communal, spiritual, and cultural power inherent within each community (Aluli-Meyer, 2008; Goodyear Ka'ōpua, 2013). This chapter examines the ways that these schools subvert colonial constructions of privilege and limitation, demonstrating that the identities and intersections historically marginalized under coloniality (including Indigeneity, race, gender, class, and land) (Grosfoguel, 2008) are instead the sources of knowledge, power, and creation within these communal schools. This chapter also discusses the ways in which these communal schools have reimagined and restructured curriculum, resources, and school structure to better serve their communities, drawing from collective resources and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to sustain themselves. These schools demonstrate the autonomy to practice critical (Friere, 1970), decolonizing (Prakash & Esteva, 2019; Smith, Tuck & Yang, 2019), culturally authentic (Aluli-Meyer, 2008; Milne, 2017), humanizing (Darder, 2015), and land-conscious pedagogy (Greenwood, 2008; McCoy, Tuck, McKenzie, 2016). They also highlight the possibility of creating authentic community schools operating under structures that may be limiting in a broader sense (i.e., charter or private school models), but in drawing from community resources and adhering to a critical, decolonizing vision, these communal schools have

succeeded in restructuring resources, pushing back against dominant systems, and creating schools that are overall accessible and authentic to their communities (Dei, 2008; Romero, 2016).

Belonging

This final chapter highlights an overarching theme emergent from the data and reminds us of the humanizing agenda at the heart of critical and decolonizing pedagogy to bring us into more authentic community with others and into more sustainable sense of belonging within ourselves (Dei, 2003; hooks, 2003). Thus, the findings in this chapter situate the creation and sustaining of belonging within participation and devotion to *communal schools*. A key element here is to understand belonging within an Indigenous and decolonizing paradigm, implying that while necessary, belonging is not something we are entitled to, rather it is cultivated collectively *through service* to our communities. Devotion is the spending of much time and energy in relationship with and in apprenticeship and service to our communities. We may be born into communities or enter communities based on culture or affinity, always through invitation. In whatever way we make our way into communities, we must remember that we do not need to belong everywhere, but to the places we do belong, we have a responsibility of reciprocity (Berryman et al, 2013; Smith, 2012). As seen from the sites in this study, service to communal schools includes returning to teach, to support with material resources, to be politically active in ways that protect the school and further justice and Indigenous/decolonizing agendas within the larger community/society, and to advocate for and

steward the land.

Locating belonging within communal schools indicates that those who participate in these schools are able to benefit from the experience of belonging, which counteracts the separation and loneliness often forced on us in a colonizing setting (Darder, 2015). Those who participate in and grow communal schools find themselves in meaningful and lasting relationships that often bear the qualities of kinship, offering care, direction, and safety to its members. Furthermore, locating belonging as cultivated through devotion and service to these communal schools, further indicates that community schools exist as self-organizing and sustaining systems (Capra & Luisi, 2018), with the capacity to escape colonial structures ((Prakash & Esteva, 2018) and care for themselves in longevity and abundance, drawing on the experience of each member to fulfill their *kuleana* or responsibility (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2013), offering their gifts and capacity to expand the transformative and stabilizing potential of their community as a whole.

Limitations & Reflections

This study employs methods of narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), storywork (Widcheif & San Pedro, 2019), portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), and critical autoethnography (Boylorn and Orbe, 2021) within a framework of Indigenous (Chilisa, 2020), decolonizing (Smith, 2012), and culturally responsive methodologies (Berryman et al, 2013) to study communal schools as complex entities consisting of interconnected systems of relationships among constituent parts (Capra & Luisi, 2018), involving teaching and learning

(Freire, 1979), interpersonal relationship and intrapersonal relationships (hooks, 2003), relationships with culture (Sleeter, 2011), relationships with land and place (Smith, Tuck & Yang, 2019), relationships with power (McLaren, 2015), relationships with community (Dei, 2008; hooks, 2003), and relationships with greater social systems (Allman, 1997). Attempts to authentically depict and interpret phenomenon emerging from such a complex entity with myriad intersections prove challenging in any form of research; as such, I intentionally selected methodologies such as portraiture and critical autoethnography – with traditions in examining such complex phenomenology as that which emerges from schools (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) and considering its relationships with power in the context of larger social and cultural sphere (Boylorn and Orbe, 2021). Nonetheless, I must acknowledge the challenges I still experienced in conducting this research and the limitations I found inherent within this study.

Several of these limitations relate logistically to the conditions we faced in the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, I had hoped to co-research with a cross-section of each school which included students, teachers, parents, community members, and admin, employing a range of participant visual media and narrative techniques in an attempt to fully center on participant voice and construction of the data and findings, increasing the visibility of these learning communities and amplifying the messages they wished to share with a larger audience. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shutdowns and pivots to distance learning, the research design for this study underwent drastic changes. While adhering to the intentionality and original research questions, I focused the design for this study instead on the voices of a

key informant at each site who became the representatives of their school communities and co-storyers of this research study.

Limiting data collection to a primary voice at each site risked flattening the perspective of the portrait of each school. Because each of these co-storyers function as an educator or an educator-founder at their sites, they also embody a position of power which may not represent the experiences of other voices at the school, including students and family members whose voices are historically marginalized within dominant educational research. However, this limitation was unavoidable as we collected data during a time period in which our school sites experienced periodic returns to distance- learning models and heightened protocol to reduce transmission of COVID-19. As an outsider into these spaces, I had to take extra ethical precautions to limit my in-person interactions with the wider school community, especially those who may be most vulnerable, including students.

Although I was able to spend between 2-4 weeks of time with each school site, including full days which extended beyond the normal school-day hours, additional in-person time would have afforded me the opportunity to observe and participate in a fuller range of daily activities within the school site, gathering a more authentic picture of what it means to participate in each of these communal schools. Distance-research tools of communication such as email, text, and video call provided me the opportunity to engage with my co-storyers in conversation to a point where we collectively felt that we had reached a saturation of data in regard to the research questions. However, additional time to participate with each school site in person

could have produced further opportunity for me to integrate and internalize my learnings, allowing me to paint even richer or more authentic portraits of each school.

A further limitation of this study is the inclusion of only two school sites. In the initial research design, I intended to include at least four sites to offer varying pictures of how communal schools may look and operate within different communities. Because I intended this study to inform educational practices within diverse communities, I had initially felt it important to include schools which represent different relationships to Indigeneity, different geographic locations, different models of school structure, and different cultural backgrounds, yet still focusing on communities who have been historically marginalized and oppressed under colonial structures. Due to COVID, I needed to limit this study to only two sites. This limiting may have decreased the diversity of data produced in this research, thus limiting relevance to a wider audience. However, by limiting the study to two sites, I experienced the chance to go deeper within the research process with each of my co-storyers and their communities. Because there was an abundance of data produced within each site, I was able to consider each story and the interconnections among all stories on a deeper level, which I may not have been able to do had I gathered data from more than two sites.

Other limitations of this study do not pertain to the COVID pandemic. Though I employ critical autoethnographic methods and portraiture as means to construct meaningful, reflexive, and critical research, by including data from my first-person perspective, I run the risk of centering too narrowly on my experiences and overshadowing the voices of my participants.

Additionally, I may engage biases that I am unaware of as part of my analytical lens, thus distorting the image constructed in this research in a way that is not representative or authentic to the communities with whom I research.

Furthermore, I am both an outsider and a non-Indigenous researcher entering communities of Indigenous and diverse folks, whose identities, languages, cultures, ideologies, and lived experiences may not be familiar to me. As such, I risk misinterpreting their stories from my outsider perspective. Especially as it pertains to the Indigenous and Black identities of my co-storyers, identities which have been the most oppressed under colonization, as both a non-Indigenous and non-Black researcher, I risk appropriating their voices for my own benefit within the academic institution. While it is not my place to claim innocence from such risks, I ground my research and work within the critical dialogical and reflexive paradigm which has informed the relationships I sustain with the co-storyers of this study and which has shaped the co-construction of this study in reciprocity and openness to adjustment, correction, and even refusal.

I have aimed to avoid generalizing in this study, so as to contextualize learning in place and the personal experiences of the storyers of this study. However, in abstracting themes from the data, constructing findings, and theoretically applying analysis to these stories, I risk decontextualizing the stories or misinterpreting them. This is a dialectical tension inherent in decolonizing research as we attempt to resist colonizing traditions yet still navigate conditions of coloniality within our academic spaces.

As I reflect on my research, I also ask myself: whose stories are missing? Beyond the limitations presented by COVID, I acknowledge the temporal-spatial-relational limitations of who was included in this study. I wonder what stories might have emerged and how those voices would shape my conception of *school as communion* had I been relationally connected to communities of other racial and cultural backgrounds. I am especially aware of the distinct perspectives that could emerge from predominantly Black and other racialized communities who have experienced severe suppression and limitation to access, resources, and space to organize. In many ways, my intention for this study was shaped by Black voices (those of my students, friends, and family members), and I still feel that I do not have adequate storying of *that* experience.

Additionally, for the sake of scope and length in this study, I did not delve deeper into discussion of how dis/ability intersects in the stories of these schools, other than to paint it into an overarching picture of belonging and safe space making in these schools. However, I continue to think deeply about the radical implications that could be surfaced in a discussion around dis/ability, especially as it intersects with race, class, ecology, and land. Schooling has a long history of exclusion and marginalization with regards to disability and this is a necessary field of critical praxis, which many decolonizing and Indigenous scholars recognize (Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2019). Within the Indigenous paradigm and in decolonizing praxis lies many ways that communities can reframe and reimagine school for everyone, including those who are not considered able bodied or neurotypical by western colonial constructs.

A final limitation of this study is inextricable from an aspect that I have also worked on accepting and understanding as a potential strength: this study speaks about Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous communities, but I am not an Indigenous person. I believe that many folks, especially Indigenous folks, could question or delegitimize this study on that basis alone. There is a need to gatekeep and preserve sacred knowledge. There are very real scenarios in which outsiders to communities take and benefit from knowledge and work that is not theirs. In this time in which I submit my dissertation in 2022, Indigeneity is trending from social media to AERA. I am not unaware of the attention I may receive or benefits to my career (if I regard myself as having one) that may be accessible to me, in having named Indigeneity in my work.

I am not sure how else to resist this other than to sit in resistance of this every day for the rest of my journey. To walk with my guides as long as they continue to invite me. To continue to grapple deeply within, wait for invitation, do only what the community asks for, and to practice refusal when I sense that a certain action may be colonizing or harmful. I remain unfinished. I welcome correction and I seek to make right, even in material ways, any trespasses I may have made. I hold this knowledge shared with me as sacred and do not compartmentalize it, but work to integrate it deeply and in community with others. I hope that this process brings forth much continued learning.

Engaging the Audience & Possible Contributions to the Field

This dissertation is written for three sets of audiences: for my committee who have mentored me on this academic path and are the gatekeepers to my entrance into the next stage of scholarship, to any who ask questions related to mine and who may find the stories I share informative to their work and journeys in serving their communities, and, finally, to my children who may one day questions similar to mine about belonging and how to be of service to the greater community. (I also feel a responsibility to authentically answer questions they may ask me about what I was doing while I carried them in my belly and why I spent such long hours working when they were still very young.) With the understanding that a dissertation reaches only a limited audience, I have allowed my writing to follow a more academic format than if I were writing for a more diverse audience. However, as an exercise in developing my voice and in remaining authentic, I resist academic traditions selectively with the intention that pieces of this writing may be adapted or used later for sharing to wider audiences through different mediums about the importance of community-grown, rooted-in-place movements and attempts to care for our own children and one another beyond settler-colonial limitations and impositions.

The stories and information shared in this dissertation have been constructed and included with the guidance and approval of my co-storyers, and my mentors. Those involved directly with this study walk in ways that try to always honor Indigeneity, sacredness of knowledge, relationships to land and place, and recognize that the collective human experience

should be one of dignity and care, which at many times necessitates a struggle against the systems and practices which are oppressive, dehumanizing, and pervasive in our lives. In coming to my dissertation, I invite you as the reader to also consider the ways in which you walk and to join us in this collective conversation about how we can better walk together, within the communities to which we belong and among communities to which we don't, but with whom we can learn to form relationships of harmony and reciprocity.

The sharing of such knowledge may shed light on the transformation processes needed by the greater education system or individual communities who struggle with or against the greater education system to better serve their community or all communities of learners. This research embodies a sustained conversation among educators of diverse intersectional identities and offers an example of Indigenous and non-Indigenous, Black, and non-Black scholar-educators collaborating to widen our perspectives and aggregate our storied knowing about communal schools. We hope to include our voices and efforts in a growing body of research and activism in community-grown, autonomous, authentic, place-based, Indigenous-aligned, decolonizing, humanizing educational spaces and systems. Such a body of research may inform policies and practices that direct our education systems toward models of learning built from the ground up, designed around values of democracy, inclusion, and sustainability.

Additionally, this research serves as an example of examining schools as complex entities that encompass people, place, power, and the relationships, actions, and dialogues that bind them together and sustain them as entities traversing physical, intellectual, emotional,

and spiritual realms. This conception of *school as communion* employs multiple theories in a complementary, bricolage way. I draw together critical, decolonizing, sustainable systems, place-based theories within an Indigenous paradigm in an attempt to construct a theoretical lens that effectively explains the ontological, social, relational, spiritual, and phenomenological complexities of communities in sustained shared action and shared place, such as those found in communal schools.

I hope this research will benefit my co-storyers, Ndindi and Trevor, and their schools, Angeles Workshop School and Hālau Kū Māna, with whom I co-constructed this study by directing academic attention and validation to their alternative models of learning, garnering further political protection for such spaces to exist. I hope to inspire more voices from within communal schools and communities who are fighting for authentic and autonomous learning models for themselves in other ways to come forward and add their voices and rich stories to this conversation. My co-storyers and I also hope to inspire many communities to take radical stands towards self-determination and community preservation, beginning with the education of their young in a new paradigm that fosters sustained liberation from capitalist hegemony (Gramsci, 1956). In doing so, I believe we can collectively carve out a more accessible and visible field of research on communal schooling; this research informs and shapes future praxis in shifting educational paradigms away from dominant structures into the power which resides at the grassroots, power to sustain beautiful spaces of belonging, learning, and thriving for all members of its communities.

The Path Ahead & To Those Who Are Coming Next

I believe this study further establishes the need for research to emerge from within communities who have or are currently striving to grow for themselves authentic, autonomous alternatives to colonizing schools. Such research embodies and supports a paradigmatic shift in social organizing and understanding our social structures—away from hierarchical, linear structures of western colonialism, towards the interconnected, nested, non-linear living systems as conceptualized by many Indigenous, Black, Asian, and sustainable systems thinkers. As such, discussions about the future of education may begin to shift away from binary debates over reform versus choice, public schooling versus independent schooling, towards complexly dialectic conversations about the relationality and reciprocity among various models, negotiating common good grounded in place and connection to one another. This paradigmatic shift encompasses access *and* authenticity, allowing even the most historically marginalized to participate in the versions of school that are best for them—humanizing, culturally-grounded, fostering belonging, and sustainable, for both humans and land.

This paradigmatic shift necessitates the sharing of what is possible in each place—testimonies of those who have resisted colonial imposition and created *something* that works and is sustained within the community who grew it. Especially necessary are voices from Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities. It is crucial that we hear stories of *communal schooling* emerging from communities who have struggled most to gain access to resources, land, space to organize, and protection from oppressive policies. Such testimonies could help to

galvanize other grassroots movements, further unsettling oppressive settler-colonial structures, and inform collective organizing to protect and sustain current efforts to grow *communal schools* within the most oppressed communities.

Additionally, all communities can benefit from a growing body of research which situates the growing of *communal schools*, or other conceptions of alternative-authentic-autonomous schools, firmly within broader discussions of educational reform, community organizing, and policy making. This research has the potential to draw communities into necessary conversations about their own journeys with unsettling colonial structures, relating to other communities and to the land in reciprocity, and growing spaces of authenticity, belonging, and stability. Research should authentically document these conversations, as they emerge contextualized in place and community. The sharing of these conversations may help to enlighten communities on how to further center Indigenous paradigms and Indigenous futures (and Black futures and the futures of other racialized colonized communities) as a necessary step of reconciliation within decolonizing efforts, bringing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people into dialectical communion that is mutually comprehensible and reciprocal.

To those who are coming next, as we collectively survey the path ahead, I bring forth once again the words of Trevor and Ndindi to do only what the community asked for. While both Trevor and Ndindi have spoken about the possibilities that expand for their own *communal schools* if others were to join them in growing authentic autonomous schools, they caution those who approach this work to attend to invitation, to the genealogies of place, to reciprocity and

relationship, and to understanding their own identities and the *kuleana*, roles and responsibilities, that come with being *who you are*. This work is heavy. It requires deep reflection, sacrifice, and devotion.

Please do not approach this work (a word directed mostly to non-Indigenous, non-Black, non-racialized-colonized folks) if you are not serious, willing to listen, respectful of refusal, and accepting of your place in all of this. This is not to say that white people do not have work to do or that they may not approach *any* work with Indigenous, Black, and racialized-colonized communities. It is a reminder that you may not do this work unless you have been invited. And you most likely won't be invited unless you are needed. And you can't be needed unless you have become someone who is useful, who has listened and learned, and who has developed a critical understanding of what settler-colonialism is, how it has been sustained, and what we can do collectively to dismantle it. Please do this dialectical work of grappling deep within, of caring for the relationships you are connected to and the spaces you currently inhabit. There are many examples of white folks who have done and continue to do this work. We know that communion across communities is possible. Trevor and Ndindi and their *communal schools* testify to this. We invite you to consider where your journey begins and to take it up with your communities. In radical love, hope, and dialogue, we hope to see the transformation of many communities from within and without. After all, we are all connected on this earth.

Beyond the Research: A Responsibility of Belonging

As I was wrapping up my last one-on-one recorded conversation with Trevor during the data collection phase of this research process in October 2021, I asked Trevor what directions he hoped this research might go—should it be shared beyond the dissertation defense? Should it remain within our communities, or stay even more intimate among only the co-storyers?

Trevor's response to me was:

Trevor: “Regarding hopes and dreams and aspirations for this research, I don't think it's the research that's going to go somewhere, I think it's you. I guess my hope and desire would be as much as we both love to just stay home with our kids and homeschool them, I think because there's so few of us with Ph.D.s, we both have kuleana to use it to help a wider impact. So my hope is just that your Ph.D. gives you the credentials to make a large impact in the way that you want, whether you start a school or whether you join a school. And whether that's in Taiwan or here in Hawaii or in LA. That's the give back, give forward. And it's heavy. You know it's heavy. My hope is, I want you to be the game changer for somebody.” (25)

As I prepare to submit my dissertation to my committee, I sit with the heaviness of this invitation, of Trevor's hope for me; I am full of feeling. In the beginning of this process, I questioned and doubted if I even had the right to be in Hawai'i in any capacity. Through every visit to my partner Michael's family (who have lived on O'ahu since Michael was seven years old), I struggled with my outsider, non-native status. In every conversation Michael began with me about his desires to “move home”, I hesitated, challenging if as a family of settlers, we could ever call that home in the face of growing settler-colonialism on an island that is suffering from

mismanagement of its lands by the colonizing occupiers. As a teacher concerned with authentic education grounded in place and Indigeneity, I wondered what rights I have to teach in communities to whom I am an invader. Thinking back to the start of this process three years ago, I remember how nervous I was, how unsure of how to move forward in making relationships with Trevor and Ndindi.

Now, as I finish my dissertation, a journey made possible only by the sacrifices made in Trevor and Ndindi's giving of their time and story and sharing their spaces and communities to me, this invitation that Trevor placed on my shoulders is heavy—with both responsibility and belonging. In that conversation, Trevor continued on, offering a big smile and welcoming me to consider more seriously Michael's desire to move home to Hawaii, saying that he and his family don't try to contribute to the problem of outsiders moving in, but when friends are willing to make the sacrifice to come and serve in the communities who need it, they are always needing educators that they can do this work with. He invited me to consider several options of schools to consider being a part of, including Hālau Kū Māna, or the communal school he may begin on the Big Island, along with a few other Hawaiian charter schools or predominantly Hawaiian public schools who are always in need of devoted and qualified teachers. Trevor even indicated what kind of radical community-based work could be taken up in each option. As he talked, I visualized myself in each scenario, feeling for the first time a new reality opening up within his invitation, one that encompassed belonging and responsibility; in it I felt both weight and relief. I think, too, about Ndindi's words to me:

Ndindi: “You must finish your dissertation, but let's say you wanted to do this for the rest of your life, I could think of four or five other people who I think you would really love to talk to, because we talk about the same things. We care about the sacred. And eight years ago, I might have known one or two people. I think there's something to fostering many relationships, supporting other people's projects, watching each other, build and grow, being honest about our contradictions and our failings. Because I think it offers [something to] kids who can't find us. If we can't scale up, but maybe we can scale out.”

(17)

In Ndindi's words, I hear the weight of responsibility too, her voice highlighting the children who have yet to find a school they can belong to. Given geographic and material boundaries, if we desire every child to have access to an authentic school within which they may find radical belonging, then there needs to be such schools in every place. This means that those of us who *know something* about creating and sustaining these schools have a responsibility to this vision and to this need. We also have a responsibility to sustain one another in this collective, yet place-grounded work. As those who grow and sustain *communal schools* do so in the face of adversity from dominant systems, it is through the communal cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) within our communities and extended networks— as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2019) says, “networks and communities that cut across institutions and communities” – that we are able to find resources and power to overcome these barriers. This sense of community is bound by a collective and intersectional sense of struggle for justice and undying hope for a reinvented world— a community that Bettina Love (2019), quoting Dr. Martin Luther King, calls a “beloved community,” “a community that strives for economic, housing, racial, health, and queer justice

and citizenship for all” (p.8).

For me then, I cannot conclude this dissertation and do the same thing as though I am unchanged. Though I am unfinished, I have a responsibility to my becoming, as Freire teaches, and now to my belonging. While I still must dialogue with questions about place, identity, and community, I know that the gifts of knowledge and belonging that were given to me in this research process compel me to keep walking this path, like Trevor said, by which my ancestors may recognize me, and like bell hooks said, in claiming the earth, creating a sense of belonging, a culture of place– not only for myself and my family, but for many– to all those with whom I am divinely interconnected. As I wait for invitation into tangible spaces and roles, roles which may include co-creating future *communal schools* or helping to sustain existing *communal schools*, I center myself within the communities of family, of learning, of culture, and of place that I currently belong to and continue to find ways to educate at the grassroots and to dismantle systems of settler-colonial power with my communities collectively.

I am dedicated to this vision of resisting settler-colonialism by co-constructing beautiful imaginaries as manifested alternative realities to the dominant structure. This notion of *school as communion* will follow me the rest of my academic and teaching journey. So will invitation, *kuleana*, genealogy to place, belonging through devotion, *kipuka*, and power as spirit. I have been blessed with so many learnings and seeings through this process and not one of them feels like I may possess it. I experience these gifts communally and in community and communion I am bound to power they hold. I look forward to how we grow in these spaces of communion.

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