

# 3

## RESEARCH AS RELATIONAL

### Introduction

Across Chapters 1 and 2, I situated educational research in its settler colonial contexts, providing an analytic frame for understanding how and why educational research has so consistently failed to deliver on its avowed promise of ameliorating educational disparity. Given the pervasive and long-standing structure of settler colonialism, then, begs the question whether educational research is doomed to enliven these logics. In this chapter and the next, my optimistic offering is no, this is not a teleological given or *fait accompli*. Research is a fundamentally relational project—relational to ways of knowing, who can know, and to place. It has, for centuries, been situated within and animated settler colonial logics. The logics of property and ownership are undergirded by colonial needs for stratification and categorical divides but are not inherent to educational research or research writ large. While I do not suggest here that shifting referents and patterns is a simple undertaking given hundreds of years of colonial structuring, I also do not concede that the pursuit of knowledge is doomed to colonial referents. In fact, regarding research as fundamentally a relational endeavor of seeking and communicating knowledge opens up materially transformative inquiries into the coordinates used. The search and communication of knowledge is imbued with relations to social and material contexts, epistemologies, and living beings. In this chapter, I frame research as a permeable and relational force, consistently shaping and being shaped throughout the various “parts” of a research design and process. This stance productively destabilizes overly linear conceptualizations of cause, effect, objectivity, and implications while also not shirking responsibility.

### Research is Relational

That all research is relational is a claim that has existed in the literature for decades. It is a claim that has been made by scholars from a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, and geography. The claim is that research is not a neutral activity, but one that is shaped by the social and material contexts in which it takes place. This perspective challenges the idea of research as a purely objective and disinterested activity, and instead emphasizes the importance of understanding the relationships between the researcher and the research site.

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### Research is Relational to Contexts

That all research is situated contextually may seem somewhat obvious, given the extant literature that has described the project of research itself, from situating the origins and sociopolitical uses of the bell curve (Gould, 1996), to historical analyses of higher education (Wilder, 2013), to analyses of the ways specific nondominant populations experience higher education, the primary institutionally sanctioned location of research (Muh, Niemann, Gonzalez, Harris et al., 2012). Research is a project and product of culture, sociopolitics, and material conditions. It does not exist outside of trajectories of thought and action but firmly within. This perspective, though, stands in direct opposition to science, as commonly and historically understood in Westernized contexts, as a practice of tried and true methods that can only be undertaken by specially trained (social) scientists, and because of that special training, able to operate from and measure its worth in terms of objectivity and neutrality. These referents of objectivity and neutrality, though, are themselves far from their ideal but rather are nestled in settler logics. As Marie Battiste notes in her book on decolonizing education,

Eurocentric science seeks principles that are universal and, as such, can be applied anywhere and any time. Born of empirical observation, made sense of by hypotheses which can, in turn, be empirically tested, Eurocentric science contradicts the faith in its knowledge. In effect, it suggests that all information is open to be disproved, thus severing it from temporal and geographic specificity. In so doing, it loses its meaning to context, and as David Suzuki has offered, such "a story ... has lost its meaning, its purpose and its abilities to touch and inform." (Battiste, 2013, citing Suzuki, 1997, pp. 19, 20)

To understand research as contextually influenced and influential, though, is not to resign ourselves from being able to enter it. We do not exist in isolation from social and material contexts, separated from each other. This is true in the sense of humans being connected, as well as human and nonhuman entities being connected and coming into existence with each other. This is a long-standing tenet of much of Indigenous knowledge systems. In 1995, Yupik scholar Oscar Kawagley wrote about ethnoecology, the study of humans and material environments in dynamic inter-relation, in his book, *A Yup'ik Worldview: A Pathway to Ecology and Spirit*. Kawagley's (2006 [1995]) book was, in relation to Western knowledge systems, premature in its discussion of ecology beyond an object/subject relation of human study and consideration, but of humans and nonhumans in dynamic relation with each other. But in relation to Indigenous knowledge systems, Kawagley's work speaks out loud a centuries-old (if not older) epistemology such that Western(ized) audiences might be able to read it, as well as exploring what this knowledge system means in an era marked not by

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interconnection but by the Anthropocene. In this way, Kawagley's work and how it is situated is itself an example of relationality, of ideas never being absent of thinkers in specific contexts. "Science is not an agentless juggernaut sweeping us along; there are agents in every corner of every context playing roles" (N. Drane, personal communication, March 14, 2015).

These entanglements of ideas, people, and material conditions are also one of the central areas of inquiry and analysis that Karen Barad (2007) explores in her book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Barad, a quantum physicist who is also an expert in feminist social theory, explores the ways in which the meanings that we make of material conditions are intricately imbued into, through, and with those conditions and vice versa. This is particularly impactful in understanding the relationship between research and knowledge. Rather than separated as a static and isolable set of factors, phenomena are intricately bound up in attempts to measure them. In an apt example, Barad draws attention to what we know, or more so what we cannot know, scientifically about light. Measured through one set of coordinates, light is a particle; through another, a wave. According to each set's logics, the results are undeniably true, but how can two truths be accurate if they are incommensurable? Barad proposes, drawing on insights from quantum physics and critical social theory, that they are true because of the more fundamental reality that all matter and ways of knowing about matter are impermanently, continuously, and contiguously interconnected. Barad uses the term, *intra-action* rather than *interaction*, to highlight the simultaneously co-constitutive and intertwined nature of research and knowledge.

Consider this more detailed example from Barad's exploration of matter and measurement tools, themselves matter as well, specifically piezoelectric transducers, apparatuses that use electric pulses to measure shifts in surface and subsurface materials. These devices are used in a variety of industries, but Barad is focused on their medical use with pregnant women and fetuses. Piezoelectric transducers do not exist in and of themselves as might be thought, still-standing and as pure objects, lying inert in complete physical form and only slightly less inert when being used. Rather, they have been and are continually put in

*intra-action* with a multitude of practices, including those that involved medical needs, design constraints (including legal, economic, biomedical, physics, and engineering ones); market factors; political issues; other R & D projects using similar materials; the educational background of the engineers and scientists designing the crystals and the workplace environment of the engineering firm or lab; particular hospital or clinic environments where the technology is used; receptivity of the medical community and the patient community to the technology; legal, economic, cultural, religious, political, and spatial constraints on their uses; positioning of patients during examination; and the nature of training of technicians and physicians who use the technology.

(2007, p. 203)

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Similarly, educational research has taken shape, continues to take shape, and will continue to take shape in dynamic relation, in intra-relation, as Barad would put it, with its sociopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts. Or more fundamentally, more radically expressed by Kawagley before Barad and articulated with his frequent co-author, Barnhardt,

Alaska Native people have their own ways of looking at and relating to the world, the universe, and to each other. Their traditional education processes were carefully constructed around observing natural processes, adapting modes of survival, obtaining sustenance from the plant and animal world, and using natural materials to make their tools and implements. All of this was made understandable through thoughtful stories and demonstration. Indigenous views of the world and approaches to education have been brought into jeopardy with the spread of western social structures and institutionalized forms of cultural transmission.

(Kawagley and Barnhardt, 1999, para. 5)

Kawagley and Barnhardt respectively articulate the differences between Indigenous and Western worldviews, and in part, they do so in order to demonstrate the ways Alaska Native peoples have, as is their history, present, and future, adapted projects of well-being and balance in the face of contradictory Western frameworks. This is not to say Native peoples have adopted these contradictory frameworks or assimilated within them. Indigenous epistemologies, as well as many Eastern and African thought traditions speak of all actions, reaction, practices, and thought being interactive. Such views demand an attention to balance and health throughout. Knowledge and practice emanating from knowledge is always in context.

Seeing all knowledge as contextual and shaping context is neither to capitulate the shape of educational research to contextual realities, such as the prominence of certain definitions of science, nor to hold it overly powerful and agentic in its own right. It is tied to and ties, binds up with humans, human history, physical objects, the planet, and the intentional and unintentional practices of all of these entities. Such an understanding is also posited in the well-known work of the philosopher Jacques Derrida, who asserted that no text or word is authoritative; they are all imbricated with traces, shadows, and referents. To date, particularly in Westernized post-industrial contexts that exhibit neocolonial logics of settler relationships, these intra-actions have shaped research to be something that has been commodified to serve the logics of property, ownership, and societal stratification.

Let's consider more, in detail, the parallels in educational research as it intra-acts with just a few of the practices that Barad lists: design constraints, market forces, and the educational background of professionals in a given area. I start with Barad's work because it speaks first, and foremost, to Western technologies. It is likely to connect most readily with Western-based readers. After the

discussion, I'll return to how Barad's ideas can be read and bracketed with Kawagley's work. I include both to connect to the entry points of many readers of this text, but it is important to note that citation practices and more fundamentally, epistemic genealogies hold material force in not just our histories but our possible futures. This is a point that has been made by several critical, Indigenous and third world scholars, such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eve Tuck, and Ngũgĩ Wa Thi'ongo.

### Design Constraints

Educational research has accepted design elements that render some studies more authoritative than others. There are two strong strains to this. First is the strain of objective, empirical research, with experimental, inferential quantitative designs prevailing. In many ways, the definitions of science that were solidified through this cultural space, those of reliability and validity, shaped qualitative research for many years. Qualitative research itself grew out of anthropology's methods of ethnography, an inauspicious commencement whose very design hinged on axes of researcher and the other (Somerville, 2013). Ethnography, literally meaning to write the people, from its Greek root words of *ethno* and *grapho*, fundamentally is about the study of peoples and the way they are written about. Within that entanglement, then, is the fact that someone is doing that writing and another being written about. Qualitative research for many decades embraced its particular disciplinary space of studying specific cultures (and not others) while also attempting to answer to questions of reliability (are the findings reproducible in other contexts?) and validity (do the measures capture the desired phenomena?) that had been established through concepts of research driven by neutrality and objectivity.

These concepts, though, stand in direct contradiction to an Indigenous worldview that sees all living beings and the planet in constant flux. The concepts of objectivity and immutable, isolable factors also stand in contrast to physical realities in which the actions of all beings and entities impact each other. Perhaps at no other time has this fundamental truth been so readily comprehensible. In the current Anthropocene (Somerville, 2013) era, as it's been termed, humans and their industrial technological developments have fundamentally and deleteriously impacted the planet's well-being and balance. From this understanding of the momentum of damage done in the name of universality, then, the claim of replicability, of stand-alone actions that can be measured by themselves and unhinged from the measurer, the measurement, or the specifics of place seems naive. However, this genealogy of social science has created design constraints that invoke these ideas as standards, with aberrations requiring specific justifications, often through the language of the existing standards (Wilson, 2009). Critical qualitative and critical ethnographic studies (e.g., Daza, 2009) have thoroughly critiqued such attempts to filter qualitative research through objectivist-driven concepts, which has yielded more space for research designs to draw from and

produce decidedly poststructural studies of qualitative, decolonial research. The journal, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Politics*, seeks, among other things, to challenge this preference for generalizability (though, is just one of the realities that have

### Market Factors

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produce decidedly multi-perspectival stances. The growth of postmodern and poststructural studies has also influenced educational research, particularly in qualitative, decolonial, and critical research designs. The open access academic journal, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society*, for example, explicitly seeks, among other formats, empirical research from qualitative designs, delineating this preference out of a decolonial dismissal of imperial notions of objectivity and generalizability (<http://decolonization.org/index.php/des>). Design of research, though, is just one aperture into the particular cultural, sociopolitical, and material realities that have contributed to its sanctioned versions.

### Market Factors

While we may not like to consider research as being subject to economics and markets, the pursuit of knowledge in racist capitalist settler societies, particularly when coupled with career and livelihood, is intricately tied to market forces. Because education and educational research are part of a larger societal fabric, ideas and perspectives come in and out of favor and experience trends, and therefore some research projects and publications are more strongly supported, literally, through funding, and somewhat more figuratively, although still linked to economic capital, through status and reputation. Studying and writing about immigration, as I've been doing for the past several years, during this large wave of push-pull of beings across fictive nation-state borders may have more market appeal than it did in the 1970s, but at the same time, writing about the racialization processes that immigrants from the global South experience may not connect with market preferences. This dichotomy is connected to the pervasive grip of the meritocratic ideals of the American Dream that may hold much stronger sway in what consumers (the granting agency, those with status already in the system) and larger politic discourses of meritocracy demand. For example, most studies about nondominant populations are framed in such a way as to address what is often termed to be a concerning exclusion of the said populations from upward social mobility and/or the American Dream (e.g., the immigrant paradox of not being able to fully access upward social mobility after the first generation). This referent has political mettle that gives it purview and market stamina despite the historical reality that upward social mobility has only been precariously granted to specific populations, most often contingent on their abilities to shed what are seen as ethnic traditions to be accepted as U.S.-born white (Ignatiev, 2008). Perhaps because the ideologies of meritocracy and social opportunity still pervade so strongly in the U.S. as well as other settler colonies, the market for research that addresses structural racism as a given and protected feature of this settler colony has less of a broad-based market value, although there are niches where such scholarship can be found.

In conjunction with the content and focus having more or less traction socioeconomically, the perception of specific researchers also comes into play.

Barad also mentions the educational background of the engineers and scientists designing the crystals used in the piezoelectric transducers. In terms of educational research, this can be understood in terms of the larger demographics of higher education and its historical and contemporary practices that have shaped and continue to shape these demographics. While the nation's student population is becoming increasingly diverse, the overwhelming majority of full-time faculty positions continue to be filled by white men and women (Muhs et al., 2013). From 1997 to 2007, the percentage of students of color enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities climbed from 25 to 30 percent, yet in 2007, women of color held only 7.5 percent of full-time faculty positions (Ryu, 2009). White men persist in composing the majority of tenure-track faculty positions, holding close to 90 percent of the nation's appointments to full professor (Fast Facts, 2013). While the whiteness of the American K-12 teaching force is a widely known entity (Sleeter, 2001), the whiteness of the professoriate and more specifically, the teacher education faculty nationwide is less addressed in relation to durable patterns of inequity (Gordon and Radway, 2008). However, if there is one learning that has been widely accepted from understanding race to be a strategically devised social, political, and cultural construct, it is that white supremacy affords access to intertwined sets of privileges and protection from complementary sets of social ills and dangers (Harris, 1993). This is of course not to say that white people do not experience prejudice or suffering, but that this prejudice is not institutionalized and is not subject to the craven exponentializing forces that systematically marginalize populations of color, poor populations, and nongender conforming and nonnormatively abled bodies. Whites across class, gender, and sexual identity lines experience far less physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, and spiritual violence than do their counterparts of color.

Educational researchers, of course, do not sit outside these dynamics but are as thoroughly entangled in these realities as anyone else. While extant white educational researchers may well have sharp and sophisticated intellectual analyses about racialization as a system of oppression, they still experience ongoing contexts of colonization within the protective wrap of white privilege. This may be part of the explanation of why the mythology of the American Dream and associated research frames that justify their premise from a withholding of the Dream for just some populations may continue to flourish. If one's personal experience of society has largely been a series of doors opening with new opportunities, a well-intentioned teacher, teacher educator, or researcher might seek a professional vantage to make this dream more available, perhaps more viable for other populations. It is perhaps much easier to believe in the American Dream or perhaps more palatable to use it as a frame for necessary research on those who have not succeeded within the United States. I do not mean to say that all white educational researchers hold an acritical belief in meritocracy, nor that researchers of color necessarily are more critical. In fact, no one's beliefs and epistemologies are intractable or easily essentialized with phenotype. Rather,

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when a concentration of an upper middle social class that has racialized protection predominates in the demographics of paid researchers, there will be population-level echoes in the ideological, methodological, and material impacts on the field of educational research (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, 2010).

That this privileged population persists in control of the uppermost spaces of the academy perhaps explains why, even 30 years after the death of ethnography was proclaimed (Somerville, 2013), problematic patterns persist in white researchers pursuing and speaking of research about racially minoritized populations, to presumably white audiences. It raises questions of the larger patterns that are echoed when a young white upper middle class female ethnographer can be celebrated for her undergraduate and graduate studies of African Americans living in inner city Philadelphia.

Alice Goffman began volunteering as a tutor in a predominantly Black neighborhood in West Philly, situated next to but not integrated with the campus of the elite institution, the University of Pennsylvania, when she was an undergraduate. While she wrote about mothering in this Black community, she did not think she could add very much to the existing research literature on the topic. She did, however, see an opportunity in studying young Black men living in a police state of surveillance, control, and persecution. She became a participant observer in this culture, and her book (Goffman, 2014) provides details on the reach and contours of this police state as well as the ways that the young Black men who allowed her into their worlds, or parts of it, crafted life and vibrancy in these difficult spaces. In her work, Goffman employs the concept of fugitivity, which Keguro Macharia defines as “seeing around corners, stockpiling in crevices, knowing the un-rules, being unruly, because the rules are never enough, and not even close” (as quoted in Sharpe, 2014). In contrast to this theoretical base of fugitivity, Goffman provides her rendering of the details of these fugitive practices for the gaze and view of whites with better social status, such as herself. In many ways, how could she not do this? It is the lens through which she looks, the path upon which she walks, and the cultural context in which she, the daughter and granddaughter of well-known academic ethnographers, was socialized. To put it more simply, she comes by this honestly. But as with the example of Jared Diamond’s (1999) work in Chapter 1, the point here is not Goffman as a lone researcher or unusual example but rather what the celebration of a clearly problematic text reveals about the assumptions of competence and the ability to annotate others’ lives. The high-profile and positive reception of her book within academia conveys the durable comfort levels that exist for peering into cultures of color through white, even with self-avowed naive, lenses. The question is not whether Goffman does or does not offer some valuable sociological analyses of this cultural and structural space. The question is how such a perspective, one that recreates an Other and dominant culture ethnographer, receives not just unfettered passageway as institutionally sanctioned research but is celebrated, verily ushered, into academic and market prominence (Sharpe, 2014).



Goffman's work and the impact of her social location, and extant parallel examples, can be further theorized through Barad's conceptualizations of action, intra-action, and assemblage. Different than postmodern takes on knowledge being subjective, a consideration of Barad's work pushes the reader of Goffman's ethnographies to consider how her material experiences of the world, including her upbringing, and her project of ethnography, make experiences come into existence, hearable, seeable, and then scriptable within the market-based academy. However, while Barad's work speaks to the intricacies of matter and meaning, with human beings as one element, it lacks a grounding in ethics, in spirituality that is just as fundamental in shaping how matter comes into existence. Kawagley's work addresses meaning and matter as co-constitutive, as foundational to not just the nature of matter but also as investment and deference to the life of matter and life itself. In other words, understanding that the knowledge is inseparable from materiality does not necessarily move to a less colonial stance. Understanding matter, beings, and meaning as part of a broader ecology begs the question of what are more generative stances.

Parallel to the question of what research lenses are assumed preferential and competent is what work could be foregrounded instead. Public scholar activists like Ruthie Wilson Gilmore and Mariame Kaba engage, design, and facilitate direct actions and public scholarship from within and for specific communities and challenges. There are many other examples, but here I focus on the work they engage for a few specific reasons. The first is that their work is not their work alone. I provide their names in order to follow and find their resultant collective places and projects. Kaba helped to create Project NIA, the Chicago-based advocacy and popular education organization that works to end youth incarceration. Gilmore's award-winning book, *Golden Gulag* (2006), a scholarly contribution that dismantles many taken-for-granted in understanding the growth of the prison industrial complex as a state strategy, was borne of her work with the mothers of incarcerated young people whose questions were about why incarceration had become the norm. Kaba's and Gilmore's projects share in common a resolute grasp of societal conditions, praxis that is considerate of those conditions, and ongoing practices that reach beyond critical analyses. As Gilmore puts it in the opening pages to *Golden Gulag*, "On the contrary, in scholarly research, answers are only as good as the further questions they provoke, while for activists, answers are as good as the tactics they make possible" (2006, p. 27).

All of these are entanglements of knowledge, and there is not a static identity or social location that is empirically better for researchers to have. How we engage in and with research, though, would benefit from a constant consideration of its ethnoecologies with privilege, oppression, coloniality, and for quite some time now, historical patterns of seduction and betrayal (Newkirk, 1996). How can educational research contend with being entangled with histories, currents, and do so in ways that engage futurities outside of settler colonial logics? To paraphrase from Kawagley and Barnhardt, how can knowledge be found and

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illuminated with a deep respect for our subsistence, not status, as dependent on future knowledge? One of many reasons why it's important to see Kawagley and other Indigenous scholars' work as foundational is that their projects of survivance (Vizenor, 2008) are simply longer and better, out of necessity and ethics.

One move toward acting on behalf of ethnoecologies is to constantly ask essential questions of any research endeavor. The first questions that I propose are in no way new ones. They are found within many nonWestern spiritual and thought traditions, as they defer to interconnections and responsibility. In Chapter 4, I take up more specifically the referents that educational research as a field should steward. Here, I provide these questions as a way to attend to relationality.

### Why This? Why Me? Why Now?

Research is a relational and ontological practice. It is always entangled with specific researchers in specific spaces and with specific outcroppings. Very little of this dynamic is linearly predictable, and yet, precisely because of the variances among and within dynamics, a closer attention and rigor should be paid to questions of coordinates and ongoing responsibilities and relations among peoples, places, and practices. This stance has a long history in many worldviews and even some research traditions, such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) approaches, but by and large, is not commonplace in institutionally sanctioned research within the Western academy. As detailed in Chapter 1, most doctoral programs encourage apprentice researchers to look to the existing research literature, find a gap within that literature, and justify a research focus based on that gap. Sometimes, personal knowledge sets are germane, but generally, they are not. When introduced and mentioned, personal perspectives are often invoked in order to be "bracketed" (Tufford and Newman, 2010), that is, either set off to the side or made explicit so that the reader can ascertain the lenses through which the research is presented.

Because of the long-standing and ongoing harmful relationships between researchers working from dominant cultural backgrounds and those who are likely to be dispossessed through research that frames them as at-risk, then, researchers working in the social sciences should be attending to questions other than gaps in the literature. While we have a responsibility to understand, contribute to, and be fluent in existing research, we also are responsible for our ontological entry-points and impacts as researchers. Because all research is conducted by living beings, with specific histories, we are beholden to consider and answer, perhaps always incompletely, the three core questions of "Why me?", "Why this?", "Who now?"

### Why Me?

This question should not be misconstrued as a prompt for exceptionality or destiny. In contrast to the oft-imbued message at elite institutions of higher

education that further anoint already societally privileged populations (Deresiewicz, 2014), this question should prompt a humble pause and reflection on the specifics of individuals' experiences that make them appropriately able to craft, contribute, and even question knowledges. This is a necessary and ongoing set of reflexive practices that push beyond the reflexivity responses to critiques of ethnography in the 1980s. Those practices took hold in qualitative research, but have not been seen as something that all researchers should interrogate. On the contrary, views that pursue objectivity and neutrality would eschew discussions of specific entanglements of personhood, space, and materiality. And yet, all research is entangled. To deal more straightforwardly with how individuals are entangled in the research they conduct affords spaces to discuss the ways in which specific manifestations yield specific locations for the knowledge being offered. For example, educational researchers who investigate the experiences of migrant youth in schooling will present a specific set of perspectives if they themselves come from lived migrant experiences, speak more than one language, have been racialized across different nation/state/cultural settings, and on. This is not to say that being a migrant will automatically create more useful research that addresses the experiences of migrant communities. There are simply far too many other factors and entities that are in complex inter- and intra-relation with each other to be able to parse these out in isolation from each other for the purposes of predication. But it also should raise more frequent questions about the utility of so much social science research conducted by members of the dominant culture within cultures that have been historically marginalized.

In her 2009 "A Letter to Communities," Eve Tuck advised both Indigenous communities and outsider researchers to consider the cumulative effects that come from predominant framings of marginalized communities as damaged. This holds effects both for those community members and arguably more subtly for how it positions the external researcher as a change agent, perhaps because he or she is not a member within the community. Tuck's piece has been widely cited, in part, because damage-based frames are ubiquitous through social science, and because she disrupts monolithic and unitary concepts of identity that still work from modernist frames. Central to my discussion of "Why me?" is a responsibility to consider ones' place within and among longitudinal and vast patterns of who has been researched, by whom, and from what theoretical frameworks.

For those who are insiders to communities, the contours are no less complicated but substantively different. Julie Kaomea, a Native Hawaiian scholar, wrote about the ways that she needed to approach research with both knowledge and humility, particularly when bringing to light potentially concerning practices (2001). Kaomea frames her article through a use of several theoretical stances that, at times, might seem to be contradictory, but that are also familiar for culturally marginalized groups that know incommensurate existences intimately. Kaomea then provides a glimpse into a paradox of findings and commitment to community:

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I knew full well that if I chose to continue with my critique of this Hawaiian-initiated program, there would probably be many Hawaiians who had been involved in the original design and implementation of the curriculum and numerous others who are strong supporters of the program whom I might unintentionally offend.

(p. 71)

Kaomea cites Maori scholar Linda Smith's now-classic work in *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012), and the often difficult position that Indigenous scholars are put in when faced with findings that challenge taken-for-granted or long-held community beliefs. Kaomea, in a telling move, returns to Native Hawaiian referents to determine how to share information that, while potentially painful, also holds important potential gains. She asks for forgiveness for the likely pain and contextualizes her work in the contextual necessary good that may result from the pain. In and of itself, this is a fundamentally relational act of research pursuit and sharing.

As the reader might expect, in keeping with a view that knowledge and ways of knowing are intricately tied and co-influential, there is not a static set of experiences, preferred personhoods, or social locations befitting educational research. Rather, we must be able to ask and articulate an answer to "Why me?" that is attentive to connections beyond academic qualifications and institutional affiliations. Our responsibilities should lie in how we frame, approach, and attend to the constantly fluctuating dynamics being researched and how the research is exacting impacts. These specifics, though, should be addressed, and in ways that are rigorously taken up throughout a research project and its products, not bracketed into a few introductory or concluding paragraphs.

### Why This?

How we frame a research problem and its context is pivotal to understanding how it has already been understood, perhaps misunderstood, and what stances are fruitful for further understanding it.

As Barad notes, "the positioning of patients during examination," is an element that will have material intra-play with all the other elements she lists. Such is the case with anyone who is invited to be part of a social science project. They are being positioned, by the researcher, and such a positioning will have immediate and ongoing, yet not fixed ramifications for everything else in the research project and products. How Black-on-Black violence is understood, for example, through the theoretical lenses of intersectional and settler colonial theories would be subtly yet substantively different than mainstream narratives afford. Users of settler colonialism would foreground a consideration of violence among people of color in reckoning with anti-blackness (King, 2010), chattel labor for settler dominance that discriminates between respectable chattel (e.g., model minority) and criminal chattel (e.g., Black menaces, migrant as illegal) as part of conjoined projects of

colonialism and imperialism (Arvin, 2013), or internal and external colonialism, as Tuck and Wayne Yang put it. Theorizing violence amid people of color through the lens of intersectionality would afford and demand an analysis of the conjoined legal and institutional categorical locations that vulnerabilize populations of color and provide articulation about how those dispossessed locations, through categorical constructs, often manifest in violence as a culturally fluid and available resource. While intersectionality does explicitly critically examine legal categories for the ways they simultaneously protect white male hetero privilege, it does not necessarily link such an analysis to land and relationships to land. Settler colonialism is insistent on this point. How a social “problem,” is framed, then, even in seemingly compatible anti-oppression frameworks actually holds important differences. This insight is not a new one, particularly to beginning social scientists who have the very legitimate and frequent question of how one chooses theoretical lenses if so many address similar phenomena. Many theories can be used to explain experiences and data, but they do not do so equally.

The issue at hand, though, is that while social scientists, experienced and novice alike, may grapple with the fit and affordance of various theoretical concepts, less often are theoretical frameworks interrogated for their own social locations. In the introductory pages to his book, *Habeas Viscus*, Alex Weheliye (2014) interrogates the critical theoretical work of biopolitics from esteemed theorists Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault for its frequent omission of racialization processes and recurrent reinstantiation of race as empirically biological. Contrasting their work, ubiquitously popular in the social sciences, with the work of feminist theorists of blackness and anti-blackness, Sylvia Wynter and Hortense Spillers, Weheliye situates the popular yet race-muted theories of white male Europeans within a settler-Indigenous-chattel perspective.

The question “Why this?” should include the kind of analysis and consideration that Weheliye offers. He explores the content-centered consideration of what a theory affords, but also what the theory backgrounds, to what effects, and how the theory’s uptake in the social sciences and citations in publications contribute materially to, in this case, settler colonial structures. Relevant questions to consider with the use of theories is what the theory affords analytically, what the theory backgrounds, to what effect, how this has played out in historical trajectories of citation and reputation, what and whose voices have been silenced, and how land and relationship to land is theorized and/or invisibilized? All of these questions are legitimate to pose to any social science research project. In the area of educational research, which I will take up more explicitly in Chapter 4, these questions are specifically located in relation to learning and knowledge (for and to the planet, humans, and nonhumans).

### **Why Now and Why Here?**

By posing the questions “Why now?” and “Why here?”, I foreground the responsibility to think about context. In their book, *Place in Research*, Tuck and

McKenzie (2010) argue that “chronological temporality, is interrupt color placelessness, forced movement, fundamental e and space, but follows with l nonhumans le

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McKenzie (2015) situate all research as connected to place, meaning geographically, chronologically (but not linearly), and spatially. Attending to context, to place, to temporality, is perhaps one of the strongest ways that educational researchers can interrupt coloniality. Coloniality, with its thirst for universal truths, values placelessness, in part, because this implicitly justifies the seizure of land and the forced movement of people and resources for the interest of landowners. The fundamental colonial view of knowledge is as objective, as residing above place and space, but the terms of that objectivity cede to those who hold it, as then follows with land. Learning and knowledge are never placeless. How humans and nonhumans learn and grow is always situated in specific places, in specific dynamics.

In a mainstream magazine article, entitled, "Speaking in (Green) Tongues: Scientist Discovers New Plant Language" (Mejia, 2014) the journalist describes how Jim Westwood, a professor of pathology, physiology, and weed science, "discovered" ways that some plants communicate with each other, particularly about risks that may be coming. But these practices are not vaguely present in the same way, from any plant to any other plant. The practice is specific, and is shaped by material conditions of soil, air, water, and levels and forms of host and parasite interactions. And, the practice is not empirically new, of course, but is only new to the researcher. The article's problematic framing of discovering this language is a cue to both the colonial stance that presumes that a practice has not existed before it has been documented and analyzed by a sanctioned researcher as well as how little Western science traditions operate from assumptions of interconnectedness.

Understanding all research as being placed does not mean that we cannot know or connect across spatialities, but simply that we must be cognizant that there is not an automatic transferability to knowledge, skills, or dispositions. For example, in the popular rush to examine what has made education in Finland successful, the contrast with the United States holds important lessons, but also equally important, cautions about the distinctly different sociohistorical, cultural, and political differences across these nation-states (N. Drane, personal communication, April 17, 2015). This also means that what might be vitally important in a particular moment and place may not be so vitally important elsewhere. For example, I am an unabashed supporter of the need for more critically conscious researchers who come from nondominant backgrounds, particularly those who are Indigenous and/or racially minoritized; however, I see this as a situated need because of the long-standing deference to whiteness as intellect, capacity, and even more fundamentally, humanness. I am unequivocal about this priority, and therefore see the project of dismantling white supremacy threatened when race-neutral justifications for diversity are used, as they are most often invoked in order to deny systemic racism and support liberal humanist justifications for individuals' property holdings (Bell, 1979; Bonilla-Silva, 2009). With many of the central shifts that this book calls for, including situating research as a relational endeavor and learning as transformation (Chapter 4), there may have to be exaggerated, protective, and vigilantly self-critical engagements as we

unfurl literally centuries of settler colonial logics. “Why now?/Why here?” reminds us to stay steadfast with this mantle.

### What Does Research Being Relational Mean for Methods? Or Can I Still Interview People for My Dissertation?

Each fall, faculty are contacted by prospective doctoral students who are interested in furthering their education, acquiring more credentials, becoming researchers, and sometimes looking for another way of being an educator. When students call or email expressing interest, we faculty respond back, often invite them for a visit to campus, and at least where I work, there is usually one full day of mutual vetting. During the meetings I’ve had with prospective doctoral students, at some point in this process the student asks about my research and, then almost always, asks about potential involvement in the work. It goes something like this, “Your work sounds important/intriguing/*insert adjective that conveys interest*. If I were to come here would I be involved in that research?”

Usually I blink while thinking, “Hmmm. We just met.”

It’s not that I have any illusion about the strategic question of these prospective doctoral students – they should be asking about the kinds of research projects sponsored at an institution if they intend to become researchers. Nor do I operate under the illusion that research institutions are not very much about preparing paid researchers, and that does not happen very much or very effectively outside of conducting actual research. And of course I am as functionally aware as I can be of how much of a non-treat it is to work with me specifically. No, the “hmm” in my reaction is that there is no way of knowing if this person’s involvement in the collaborative research I’ve been part of would be beneficial to the people involved outside of the university. Research is a fundamentally relational, cultural, and political practice. As an intentionally community-involved, collaborative researcher, such a question without contextual knowledge leaves me at a complete loss. I shouldn’t be able to answer that question, as it is simply not up to me completely, and relationships for a newcomer have to be built all around, not just with the person who holds the institutional designation of principal investigator.

When we engage in many academic research activities, though, there tends to be a generic, tacit reference to accepted graduate students (and more so faculty for that matter) as inherently, perhaps unilaterally, capable of conducting research. For example, in applying for and procuring grants, an essential activity for any faculty member at a research institution, it is wise to include line items to fund graduate students, to both people the work of the research as well as to support their stipends, tuition needs, and their development as researchers. But here’s the problem: acceptance into a graduate program does not necessarily tell us very much about the ability to be of service to a specific population in specific contexts working on often multi-faceted, hydra-headed issues (Picower and Mayorga, 2015) of equity and oppression. Considering the demographics of those who

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make it into doctoral programs at research-intensive universities, the viability of that population knowing the needs, logics, and intelligences in communities far flung from the academy should minimally be up for discussion. Of course, neither do the initials P, h, and D necessarily tell a person, particularly one not intimately familiar with the academy, anything about those capacities. In fact, those initials have far too often meant seduction, betrayal, and opportunism. It is for these good reasons that so many communities have enacted their own processes (Indigenous Rights Radio, 2014) of ascertaining how and when to grant external researchers entry. In fact, while it has become the bane of some researchers' existences, the practice of several Indian nations, school districts (e.g., Navajo Human Research Board, 2007), and other collectives to have minimally named their own research clearance procedures and sometimes barred external researchers should be seen as a powerful act of empowerment and refusal (Tuck and Wayne Yang, 2014) in the face of so much appropriation.

Working across the very different and sometimes oppositional needs of marginalized communities and university-based researchers should not be, as it has often been, a question of how the researcher can "gain access." In participatory approaches to research, for example, access itself is an insufficient if not problematic concept. Most participatory approaches to research are long-term and multi-perspectival and as such, access is neither a single point of entry nor singly conferred. It takes a long time to establish trust, to build relationships, to engage in ongoing, messy dialogues and practices that interact with systemic issues, which are, by definition and reality, never a single-fulcrum issue. To put this in terms used by Barad and Somerville, they are entanglements. None of that, though, is well reflected in traditional linear research designs of problem, literature review (from the academic library), methods, findings, and results.

This, however, does not mean that tactics like observation, watching, interviewing, and mapping, to name the methods most frequently found in qualitative designs, are no longer viable. The tension arises when such methods are used in a fashion that mimics a desire for the mythological objectivity most frequently claimed through inferential statistical designs. It is more than possible and exists in extant examples, to devise and roll out qualitative research projects involving interviewing, observing, and coding. The questions and approaches that control for variables are important, but for different questions than those that tend to be asked and pursued by marginalized communities finding ways to survive despite what a heteropatriarchal racist settler state might have in mind for them. Life just isn't that controllable outside of labs. It's much messier, and it should be. The mess also yields insights, if we can shake off the logarithms of the academic processes long enough to see them.

For example, in a collaboration with a group of youth, educators, and social justice activists living in the same city, I was working with two graduate students to investigate the contours of settings outside of school that support critical consciousness of youth. In this mix, sometimes some of the youth have sophisticated



analyses about a just society, and sometimes not, as would be the case with any group. At one meeting, there were some strongly misogynistic phrases thrown around at the end of one of our sessions. Now, adherence to the previously designated inquiry into social justice development might mean asking some of the youth to participate at a later date because their comments and practices do not resonate with any descriptor of social justice praxis and therefore would yield little in the way of data. In such a scenario, the graduate students might interview those who remained in the program and conduct some activities with them, but they wouldn't necessarily be directly making central decisions about who should remain in the program, as those decisions would be for the principal investigator, not the apprentice graduate students. But in this approach, insight from the graduate students was crucial to making meaning of the interactions. They had been onsite, working as long-term substitutes with these youth and therefore, could pose plausible theories to make meaning of the comments within a larger knowledge base of these youth, and provide suggestions on how to proceed. These "students" have that place as researchers because of their time in the school, certainly, but that would not have come to be without their ability into those roles in the school, be effective teachers of the youth, and to be critically reflective practitioners. It also helps that they understand aspects of navigating the world from nondominant social locations through their own lived experiences. In such embedded and complex projects of knowledge pursuit, it is my hope that these graduate students are learning something much more important than a textbook-worthy semi-structured interview protocol. I'm hoping they're learning that if the research is worth its mettle, it won't simply seek the cherries in the data that all but shout "quotable," but that the research makes the theories work as well as works the theories in relation to the data. That is research that is considerate of its fundamental nature of movement and impact without trying to control every aspect.

Which brings me back to the blinking I do when asked if someone I just met three minutes ago would be able to work, to be of service, to be a "researcher" in such a setting. I've yet to arrive at a better, more honest answer than "Let's see how it goes" because that contains my desire to delay making promises that serve academic processes but at the backgrounding of other participants.

### Does Answerability Mean that Everyone Should Be Doing Participatory Action Research or Qualitative Research?

No. While we have a long and vast history of imperialist-infused prominence of protecting stakes in objectivity and neutrality, social science and educational research more specifically should not lurch to uniformly adopting a different particular epistemic stance, methodology, or approach, particularly while so few are fluent with the echoes and ongoing structure of settler colonialism. Decolonization requires, at minimum, a consideration of how ideologies impact material practices, how practices are always epistemically shaped, and vice versa.

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To swap, then, a set of material practices for another flirts with cosmetic changes that may do precious little to interrupt material coloniality. In the greater Mikmaq and Wamponoag lands, more commonly known as Boston, there are now over 60 institutions of higher education. Of those, about a dozen have doctoral programs in educational research. Imagine if just half of those doctoral programs began requiring their students to use participatory approaches with "the community." Of immediate concern is the need to better consider who and what counts as "the community," and how that nominal does work to also name and locate higher education and research as beyond the community. But more central to my point here is that schools, community-based organizations, families, and spaces would be quickly inundated. Already poorly compensated nonprofit workers, who are strapped for fiscal, human, and material resources, would be in the unenviable position of hosting graduate students and paid researchers who may be helpful but also would require training to learn some of the institutional history, of the nonprofit organizations. Worse yet, they might ride roughshod over the cultural specifics of the nonprofit organization's population's needs. What happens in the spaces where the needs of the nonprofit organization are incommensurable with the needs of the institutionally affiliated personnel, such as university institutional review board clearances, timelines for graduation, and captured data? What happens when, as more and more higher education moves from public funding sources to short-term private sources, the grant runs out?

For example, in some of my work with undocumented youth (Patel, 2013), the university-based procedures for informed consent ran counter to the participatory and activist goals that we had as a collective. Typically in science, and particularly within qualitative studies, masking the identities of participants is seen to be one of the pre-eminent ways to protect participants. One of the projects I've been involved with sought to interrupt narratives of meritocracy as they are applied to undocumented migrants. In this project, undocumented youth activists used their names and their stories in loud and explicit ways as forms of public pedagogy, activism, and social agitation. None of them wanted their names masked in the research. To them, this seemed to be completely out of keeping with what they were trying to counter: an anonymizing of identity to deny personhood. To conduct research with them into these practices begged at minimum a reconsideration of what is seen to be default "good practice" in university-sanctioned research. For a more thorough discussion of the social, political, economic, and cultural locations of consent in university research, see Tuck and Guishard (2013).

### Does Prioritizing Holism and Intra-Relationships Mean That It's Incorrect to Look Closely at Specifics?

One of the great draws and strengths of advanced higher education is the ability to focus in closely on a topic and/or particular methodologies. To become expert

in a field requires depth in the field and an automaticity with its particular schematics. However, one of the drawbacks of this rigor of study is a segmented and isolated set of expertises. While there is not anything inherently wrong with depth and expertise, it becomes problematic when expertise sets are incapable of speaking to each other and lose a sense of how multiple forces interact in everyday lives. For example, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, several studies indicated that there is an extremely strong correlation between lead levels and occurrence of violent crime in cities. However, these compelling results were not taken up or even pursued by criminologists. As Drum explores in his 2013 article about the general shrug that this compelling finding received, part of the answer to why this has not been taken up has to do with how specializations tend to privilege certain types of explanations, and background others. He quotes public policy professor Mark Kleiman, who has studied promising methods of controlling crime. Kleinman stated that because criminologists are sociologists, they are more drawn to sociological explanations, not medical ones. Without a doubt, all disciplines are susceptible to this kind of patterned meaning making. The problem, therefore, is not in deep knowledge, but in siloed knowledge that rarely has the opportunity to be filtered and connected through a different lens. This is a particularly robust place for educational research to show deeply needed research. Educational research is not a discipline unto itself. It is a geographic space in society. To understand it, economists, sociologist, linguists, anthropologists, historians, and psychologists could all contribute perspectives. As a field, though, educational research should draw from and work across those disciplines, having each be essential and simultaneously insufficient on its own.

### Conclusion – Educational Research as Relation

Education and educational research have always been entangled with intra-acting with material conditions of children, teachers, families, communities, and the planet. However, this stance of seeing research relationally, inextricably bound in its material contexts, has not been commonly taken up. Perhaps this is because of an echoing default to and desire for an objective or removed position of research and therefore researchers. However, to be so, educational research would have to be an overwhelmingly unique and spontaneous generator of decontextualized phenomena. Clearly, this is not the case. What would it mean, then, for educational research to be more explicit about how it is situated within, affecting, and affected by other material conditions and ideologies?

Headlines bring the frequent newest case of legal and extralegal violence against people from non-dominant communities, but rarely is it asked how research is part of this history and contemporary structure. In the summer of 2013, George Zimmerman, a white self-appointed neighborhood watchperson, was acquitted of legal charges stemming from his arrest after shooting and killing unarmed Trayvon Martin, a young black male who was out for a walk. For

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populations of color, the murder and subsequent acquittal were testimony to the engrained structural racism endemic to the United States. Around the same time as the acquittal, educational researchers in the United States, as well as other locations, were nearing the deadline to submit proposals to the largest convening of educational researchers in the continent, the American Educational Research Association. I wrote the following short essay out of sheer frustration at seeing a disconnect between so many conference proposals, manuscripts, and the societal context in which they take place. It seems an appropriate summation of what it means to see educational research as relational and then seek realistic coordinates from a place of integrity.

#### **WHAT DOES THE TRAYVON MARTIN CASE HAVE TO DO WITH EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH?**

I write this still reeling from the Zimmerman verdict that verified, again, that the infrastructure of this nation is one built to support and maintain white supremacy. My social media feeds are flooded by the posts of pain, anger, and resentment that people of color are feeling as they are reminded of the core truths about this nation. Many of my educational researcher colleagues are also likely preparing their proposals this week to present at the American Educational Research Association that takes place every spring.

What does one have to do with the other? Everything. Schooling is one of the key locations of social reproduction in society. That means, put less academically, that schools are one of the core spaces where some are privileged and others are marginalized. It is where standards of competency and images of intellect are conveyed, all culturally based and typically, biased. Schools, as a part of a nation built on white supremacy, reflect this culture. From pedagogy and curriculum to policy and private interests, schools do the bidding of a nation constructed to eradicate Indigenous populations, ensure that populations of color are trained to populate low-income home, work, and incarceration spaces, and maintain property rights for European Americans.

Educational research undoubtedly figures into this equation and therefore we must ask what our research does to advance, topple, or create alternatives outside of this deliberate design of domination. As we prepare our proposals and proofread the required sections of theoretical framework, research methodology, and significance, let us do so with some modicum of answerability to the ways in which schooling has acted, for centuries, to name Indigenous peoples as savage to treat them savagely, African American people as thugs to treat them thuggishly, and immigrant populations as peripheral to place them on the side. Higher education and the research industrial complex are a fundamental part of this landscape and calculus of schooling.

The proposals that we prepare should minimally explicitly address how the research we present addresses a system that requires individualistic ideas of meritocracy to maintain a white heteropatriarchal supremacy. Meritocracy tells us that if we work hard, play by the rules, and are good people, this system will reward us. Put in terms of higher education, this is the logic used to position publications in high status journals as the sure route to promotion and tenure. Put in terms of K-12 schooling, it comes down to the grades and, increasingly, test scores.

So, for AERA, if the research is about increasing those beloved test scores, at least be explicit about what Eve Tuck implores social science to do and address your theory of change: how exactly will the better scores alter the "open season on black boys" as Gary Younge put it so eloquently? A bit more broadly construed, how might this research help different populations locate their social advantage and act responsibly from those places? I don't imagine educational research to be able to speak to the triage needs that many of us are feeling right now, but neither should it require six steps of extrapolation to address explicitly systems of codified colonialism, racism, and patriarchy.

Educators and educational researchers often work from the theory that with a good education, social mobility and achievement and safety is likely in the United States. Trayvon Martin was an honor student with a 3.7 GPA and had a full-ride scholarship to a college. He played by those oh-so-precious rules of meritocracy, but Zimmerman played by the much more fundamental rules of white supremacy and violence.

This essay has within it initial, incomplete but necessary stances to engaging research as answerable to not just "larger" societal problems but as having played a role in coloniality for hundreds of years. However, this is not a commonly shared or rigorously understood history. Because of that, there have been, and we should expect that there will continue to be, ways that educational research is connected to contexts in less than helpful ways. Attending to our role within shifting contexts, our own shifting roles, in a constant state of flux with each other is, at the onset, a seemingly daunting task, particularly when we understand the premise that there cannot be a pure knowability of any phenomenon, educational or otherwise. However, this stance also affords the opportunity to unfurl the grip on control and instead situate ourselves as answerable. While this is a preferable stance for anyone, particularly given the historical stance of ownership and territory that is fundamental to settler colonial logics, as educational researchers we are also able/obligated to be specific about what we are answerable to. In the next chapter, I discuss three key tenets that educational research should be answerable to: learning as transformation, knowledge as impermanent, and genealogies of coloniality.

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